2
The Girl Who Reincarnated as a Calamity
Story
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Art
Tam-U
Full Clearing Another World under a GODDESS with Zero Believers

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Prologue: The Story of a Pair That Liked Games

“You’re always playing games, right, Takatsuki?”

“Huh?”

We were in classroom 1-A of Eastern Shinagawa Public Junior High School, and the person who’d suddenly spoken to me during lunch break was a petite girl wearing pigtails.

Not much about me had changed in the half year since we’d started junior high. I was still a loner, so the girl and I weren’t friends. I knew her name at least since she was a classmate, but we’d never spoken…until now.

“Ah, sorry. I kinda came out of nowhere. Am I interrupting?” she asked.

“N-No, not at all…”

Even if she was, it’s not like I could tell her that outright. I can’t talk with people! And on top of that, my heart was racing because I hadn’t talked to a girl in a long time.

“What kinda game is it?” She asked her next question as she leaned over to look at the screen. Guess she had a pretty loose concept of personal space.

“Uh, it’s a new one…” I answered before pausing. “Do you like games, Sasaki?”

I was sure that was her name—Aya Sasaki. She was a talkative girl who scampered around like a hamster. She wasn’t a grand beauty, but she was cheerful and easy to talk to, plus she had a cute smile. The guys and girls all loved her.

Obviously, she’d have nothing in common with a gloomy gamer like me, so why had she come over to talk? Some kind of dare?

“Aya! Come on!” one of her friends called.

“Comiiing!” Sasaki answered. She raised a hand before turning back to me and clapping me lightly on the shoulder. “Let’s talk about games some other time, Takatsuki!”

Once she’d dashed off, I noticed that my body felt slightly hot where she’d touched me. Maybe I was a little jealous.

What was that all about?

It’d been a long time since a girl had spoken to me. The experience had been nerve-racking…but Sasaki *did* seem easy to talk to.

Whatever. Her saying “some other time” was probably just one of those social obligations.

Or so I’d thought…

“But here she is at my house…”

“What was that?” asked Sasaki.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it.”

Out of nowhere, she'd asked me if I was free. Seeing as I'm in the go-home club, I'd said my schedule was free *every* day.

"Can I come over then?" she'd asked, and there'd been no way to refuse.

As she peered around my room, she commented, "You don't have much stuff, do you?" Then, she sat down on my bed with a soft thump.

Uh... That's *where you're sitting?* No hesitation at all, right onto a guy's bed.

“So! What games do you play?” She was kicking her legs in the air and looking at me.

“Uh...well these are the games I bought recently...”

She looked through them. “Aww, they’re all single-player. Don’t you have any two-player ones?”

Well, I always played on my own! It’s not like I had anyone to play with anyway.

“I’ll bring some of my brother’s over next time.”

Huh? You’re coming again? I thought, but couldn’t ask.

In the end, we played an RPG together.

—The next day.

Here she is again.

This time, she had brought several games that she’d taken from her brother.

Apparently, Sasaki liked games, but her brother wouldn’t play much with her anymore, so she was looking for someone who would.

“Can’t you play with your girl friends?” I asked.

“Well, none of them like games.”

“Hm, so why not look for someone who does?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” She answered my question with one of her own, and her expression conveyed an unspoken, *What are you on about?*

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense.”

“Besides,” she added after a minute, “girls are cliquey, so making new friends is a lot of work.”

“O-Oh... Right...”

So this was the darkness of female society. I’d heard some superstitions online.

“Takatsuki, does it bother you? Me being here.”

“Nah, not at all.” I’d been nervous at first, but I was always willing to talk about games. It was actually pretty fun.

So that was how Sasaki had ended up coming over to my place a few times each week. Before I knew it, I’d stopped calling her Sasaki and had started calling her Sasa. This routine continued as we moved into high school as well.

“Hey, do you have plans over Christmas?” she asked one day.

“Why bother asking when you know I don’t, Sasa?”

By this point, we’d gotten completely relaxed with each other.

“Keep yourself open then,” she said.

“I already told you that I’m free.”

Well, if she wanted me to keep that day open, then I would. Otherwise, I’d never get the chance to find out why she wanted me to be available.

“I’m looking forward to the ski trip next week!” she cheered.

“Well, I’m not great with the cold. I wanna bunk off and game at home.”

“You don’t exercise enough, Takatsuki. You need to do it more.”

“You like to exercise, Sasa?”

“Hm, I think I prefer playing games at your place now,” she murmured into my ear, her warm breath carrying her words.

That’s bad for my heart!

I felt my face redden as she giggled.

All of this was a memory from winter during my first year of high school.

Recently, I’d felt like I was forgetting her smile. The last time I’d seen her was over a year ago. It was just before we’d ended up in this world, and the two of us had been talking in the trapped bus.

Right now, the sight above me was a familiar ceiling in the rest area of the Macallan adventurer’s guild.

I’d been dreaming of the past.

I miss you…Sasa.

She was a classmate I hadn’t been able to see in this world—she’d been my only friend from junior high, and a girl that I’d had some quiet feelings for back then.

I’ll never see her again…

I spent the rest of the day feeling sad.

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Departs for Labyrinthos

"Ahhhh!"

Flee! Flee! Flee!

The goblins, orcs, and ogres that were chasing us all had looks of rage on their faces. I guess I'd also be pretty pissed if someone firebombed my house.

Regardless, I kept running, and I could see Lucy standing in the distance.

My role was to draw them back into Lucy's range.

"*Ground Magic: Boulder*! *Fire Magic: Imbue Flame*!" Lucy cried, raising her staff. A massive boulder appeared in the sky, burning scarlet.

The monsters noticed that something was up, but it was already too late.

"Meteo! Blow them all away!"

At least Lucy was enjoying herself. By the way, there wasn't a spell called Meteo—Lucy just had decided to nickname it.

Whoops, now's not the time to space out!

Dodge!

The massive crash of the flaming boulder blew the monsters away. Dust erupted into the air as the blast flattened everything, leaving only a crater behind.

"Man, Meteo's as overwhelming as ever," I said.

"Good work, Makoto! You dragged in fifty monsters today. Was it a close call?"

I laughed feebly. "I'm fine."

"Let's get back to the guild then! We're gonna make *bank* today!"

"We need to put the fires out first."

The aftereffects of Lucy's spell had ignited several fires that were now burning around the vicinity, so we'd need to put them out before they developed into a full-blown forest fire.

This was all that my water magic had been used for recently. Thankfully, I could now generate water, even away from an actual water source, because of elemental magic. Not that I'd learned that technique for firefighting, though.

Later, I was with Lucy at the skewer stall.

"Another ale, Chef," I ordered.

"Coming up," he responded. "You've been drinking more recently, Makoto."

"I get how tasty it is now."

Not that it was any less bitter. No, enjoying ale was about the actual drinking (or so someone had once said).

“Ha ha,” the chef laughed. “Well, you’re a full-fledged adventurer now that you know the joy of ale.”

“Hmm, I’m not a fan,” Lucy said.

She was drinking a fruit cocktail. It hadn’t been part of the stall’s menu before, but the chef started making it for Lucy once she became one of his regulars.

“Hey, Lucy, come drink with us!” an adventurer called.

“Forget that apprentice mage and party with us tomorrow,” added another.

“Your magic was crazy today,” a third one joined in.

No one would’ve suspected that, until just a little while ago, Lucy had been a problem child that no party had wanted to touch, even with a barge pole.

But mages that could use strong spells were in demand by every party, huh?

“I don’t want to party up with anyone but Makoto!” Lucy cried out faithfully.

“Phew,” I sighed, draining about half my glass of ale.

“Drinking it like water, huh?” a middle-aged adventurer asked.

“Oh, Lucas,” I answered. “Nice work, by the way.” Apparently, yesterday he’d taken out a water dragon that’d been harassing the fishermen of Lake Chimay.

In all the time I’d been in this world, I’d never seen a dragon. *I wonder if they’re strong. Will I ever be able to fight one?* I pondered these questions before tilting the glass and draining the rest of my drink.

Bitter, I mused as I looked at the bottom of the empty glass.

“Come on, Makoto. You’re lookin’ pretty gloomy for someone that set a new record—fastest to reach iron rank in the Macallan adventurer’s guild!”

That’s right, Lucy and I were iron rank now, commonly called mid rankers.

“I bet that bastard’s just mooching off Lucy’s magic.”

“He’s got it good for an apprentice.”

“Shh, he’ll hear you if you’re loud.”

I can hear you anyway...

I had the *Listen* skill, so I could hear even that. I’d honestly prefer it if they would keep the gossip further away.

“Hey! Makoto’s great! Don’t accuse him of stuff!” Lucy yelled at the other adventurers, angry at the slander that her sensitive elven ears had enabled her to hear.

“It’s fine, leave ’em be,” I told her.

“But...” Lucy argued. Judging by the look on her face, she was not willing to let it drop.

“They’ve been stuck at bronze for two years, so they’re just jealous of Makoto, and they’re venting. Pathetic,” Lucas had added that last word scathingly, but his overall message seemed sympathetic to me.

“Makoto!” Mary cried out, hugging me. “I’m so glad you’ll drink with me now!”

“I still can’t hold my booze, so I’ll only have two or three,” I told her.

I hadn’t gotten any better with my alcohol tolerance, even after drinking regularly. Lucy held her liquor fairly well, so did it have anything to do with her stats?

Either way, I wasn’t actually all that fond of alcohol. The only reason I drank anyway was...because of my mood.

“You’ve got the face of someone with worries, so why don’t you talk to your guild receptionist?” Mary whispered this into my ear, her arms still around my neck.

“Mary! He’s in my party, so I’ll talk it out with him!” Lucy shouted.

“Don’t you think it’d be easier for him to talk about his troubles with someone older?”

“I’m older than him too!” protested Lucy.

“Only by a few months though, right? You’re practically the same age. By the way, what do you think about trying out some dungeons for mid rankers?”

But Lucy wasn’t having it. “I already told you! We’ll decide that together!”

“Chef, another ale!” Mary called. She’d finished hers really fast!

Lucy cried out competitively, “I’ll have another as well!”

I was getting crushed here.

“You sure are popular,” Lucas laughed.

These arguments had become routine recently. They weren’t really fights; it was more like Mary was teasing Lucy.

I guess I did look pretty popular from an outsider’s perspective. And, thanks to that, the male adventurers were sending some pretty harsh glares my way.

Sigh...

“Lucas, how do I get stronger?” I asked, quietly putting my recent worries into words.

“Hmm?” he said. “I think you’re already strong enough. You took down a griffin and an ancient chimera. The other bronzes have gotta be jealous.” His facial expression implied that he thought I was being ridiculous.

“Jean took out the griffin, and the chimera was Nina’s kill.”

“They couldn’t have done it if you weren’t there though, right?” Lucas asked. “That’s what I heard.”

“Well, I don’t know. I think Lucy’s stronger than me.”

Lucy’s fire magic had been the deciding factor in both of those fights.

“That’s what parties are for though,” Lucas assured me. “You need attackers and support—both are important.”

“I mean, I understand that, but...” I trailed off and drained my drink. “Another ale, Chef...”

“Sure thing, but don’t overdo it.”

“This’ll…be…my last tonight…” I was actually pretty wasted… The world seemed to be spinning. *Damn, I didn’t control myself well enough.*

Recently, I’d left offense entirely to Lucy and had just been on bait and cleanup duty (aka, firefighting). The last strong monster I’d taken out had probably only been an ogre. And even that’d been done with a trap.

“What level are you, Makoto?” the chef asked.

“Level 20 now.”

“You haven’t even been an adventurer for a year, but you’re already iron rank *and* level 20,” Lucas pointed out. “So, what are you complaining about?” Lucas and the chef exchanged bemused looks.

“I wouldn’t say I was *complaining*, exactly,” I answered, opening my Soul Book.

“Ooh, Makoto’s Soul Book?” Mary asked, perking up.

“Peeking into someone else’s is rude, Mary.”

“I work for the guild, so it’s fiiine, eh heh heh.” *No good, Mary’s completely drunk.* “Hmm… Still, these stats at level 20? You’re right. They’re too low. Hang oooooonnn?!”

“What’s up, Mary?” Lucas asked, joining her in peering at my Soul Book.

“L-Look! That water magic mastery!”

“Let’s see… Wait…99?”

“I’ve never seen someone get their mastery to 99,” the chef added, impressed.

The three of them gave me looks like I was an utter weirdo.

“See, Makoto’s amazing!” Lucy insisted. I don’t know why *she* was proud of it. She already knew I’d hit 99.

“This is why I’m worried,” I told them.

“Why?” Mary seemed confused.

“I hit 99 mastery, but I’m still not much stronger.” Even with my low mana reserves, I could train my mastery. The maximum value was 99, so mine could go up no further.

The precision and speed at which I could cast had risen some, but my spells were still weak. For all the effort I’d put in, it was honestly pretty disappointing. I’d been hoping to get some kind of bonus for hitting the maximum level.

“O-Oh, right. What about elemental magic?”

“I’m at my limits there as well.”

I’d even borrowed that book from Mary, and I couldn’t at all see spirits like the giant had said. Would I really be able to do it?

Later on, someone called out, “Hey, Makoto! You good?”

“Lucy, your clothes are showing off as much as ever, I see.”

“Got a problem with that, Emily?”

It was Jean and Emily, adventurers that we’d partied up with before. Behind them was an unfamiliar male fighter along with a female mage. I guess they were new party members.

That's kinda shocking too, I thought. I was almost certain we'd carry on working together pretty frequently, but Jean and Emily had already formed another party.

I guess it was our fault for not calling out to them, though.

"Yo, Jean," I answered.

"Thought we could eat together, but it looks like this place is full," Jean said in disappointment. The skewer stall didn't have much room.

Lucy, Lucas, Mary, and I were all present, along with a few other customers, and that was all that this stand could seat.

"Looks like you've been doing pretty well for yourselves," he added, putting a hand on my shoulder. Was he always this nice to be around now? Guess that swordsman I used to clash with is long gone.

"It's Lucy that's doing well," I told them. "I'm just behind the scenes."

"That's not… Well, I heard the rumors saying that, I guess," Emily conceded, her expression saying that she couldn't find another way to put it.

Emily could read the mood, so maybe she realized that I wasn't all too happy.

"Let's all aim for silver rank then!" Jean cheered with a laugh before heading off to another stall.

The fighter and mage both gave bows. They were probably new rookies that Jean had lent a hand to. A spellsword, fighter, mage, and cleric. It was a good party composition.

"Huh, I thought Jean wanted to party up with you," Mary mused. *So did I, to be honest.*

"No way! I know I can't work in a party with Emily," Lucy griped. She *had* been in their party before but had left.

It might be better now, though. Lucy had improved her magic, and I'd seen her and Emily having lunch together every so often.

She'd be way better off with them than in my two-person party.

I caught my thoughts spiraling down. *That's no good.*

"I'm heading to bed," I said. "Night, Lucy."

"Huh? R-Right. See you—"

"Let's take a break tomorrow," I interrupted. "We've made a fair bit of money."

"Y-Yeah. Maybe we can go shop—"

"I'm gonna go to Fujiyan's tomorrow."

"Right, okay…"

With that, I tottered back toward my room.

"Shot down, huh," came Mary's voice.

"Shut up!"

"Right, another glass!"

—The next day.

“I’m sorry, Mister Takatsuki, the boss isn’t here today’h…” Nina told me apologetically. I’d gone to the Fujiwara Trading Company’s store, but Fujiyan wasn’t in, so she greeted me instead.

Guess I shouldn’t have turned up out of nowhere.

“Do you know when he’ll be back?” I asked.

“He’s making a big deal, so he isn’t planning to be back for two or three days’h…”

“Oh, right.”

Damn, the one guy I could complain to was gone. Oh well, maybe I’d go hunt some goblins solo.

“By the way, Mister Takatsuki, look at this’h!” As thoughts of goblin slaying passed through my mind, Nina smiled and showed me something shining on her chest.

“A gold badge?”

“Yes! Thanks to the divine protection of that deity, I managed to become gold rank’h!”

“Wow…congratulations.”

That was incredible. The gold badge was the highest rank that branch offices of adventurer’s guilds could give. Platinum ranks and above had to be issued at the main office in the capital. In other words, Nina had reached the highest rank in the Macallan adventurer’s guild.

“I never thought I’d get past silver rank on my own. Guess you never know what’ll happen’h.”

“Well, your martial arts were incredible.” That footwork must have been what earned her the rank increase.

“The boss has been super happy with the deals he’s gotten thanks to that magicite—that’s thanks to you too’h!”

Nina was praising me with a wide smile on her face, but I honestly felt more lifeless than happy about it. Everyone else was doing great, but I…

“Give Fujiyan my regards then,” I said.

“Sure! Come again’h!”

Nina watched me leave with a smile.

I’d now lost my plans for the day.

And so, I decided against goblin hunting and just spent the day training in the town plaza. I’d hoped that Lucy might’ve been around, but she wasn’t.

Once I finished up my training, I offered my daily prayer to my goddess.

“Phew,” I sighed, falling back and checking my Soul Book.

Lifespan: 11 years.

Looks like I’d survive a little longer, probably due to the daily hunts.

Water Magic Mastery: 99.

I’d maxed it out. Nothing had changed in the month since I’d done so, despite me thinking that its level might even go past 100. But, no.

After those two entries, the rest of my unimproved stats were listed.

I don't get it.

When I had first arrived in this world, I'd been so excited. But back in the Water Temple, when I'd found out how low my stats were, it'd been a big shock. I'd trained for a year after that but hadn't gotten much stronger. Even so, I'd managed to train my skills and had become an adventurer.

I'd even grown pretty well-rated lately. I didn't have any huge problems, but... *I guess this is how it is...*

I'd enjoyed everything until recently.

There was the first monster I'd killed.

My first nickname, even if it was crap.

The first friend I'd made.

The first time I'd nearly died and had gotten my goddess's protection.

The first adventure I'd had with a classmate.

All of that had been stimulating, but recently...everything seemed boring.

As those thoughts swirled through my mind, I felt myself drifting off.

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I was standing in a place with nothing. Actually, that was a bit rude—let's call it the goddess's space.

"Oh, Goddess. It's been a while." I wasn't even surprised at this point, so I just put my hands together in a familiar movement and bowed.

I hadn't seen her for some time, and the last time I'd heard her voice had been back with the giant.

She didn't say anything.

"Uh? Goddess?" I asked, lifting my head at the lack of response. She was standing right next to me.

Whoa. She was close enough that her hair brushed against me. Her eyes were cold as well. Had I made her angry?

I'd been playing things pretty safe recently...

"U-Umm."

"Say, Makoto?"

"Yes?"

"You're my believer, right?"

"Of course," I replied. "I pray to you every day."

"I know. I'm watching."

That figures. Still, her expression was cold.

"Do you know what a goddess's job is?" she asked.

"A goddess's job?" I parroted. That was a weird question. Well, their churches seemed to benefit from all the donations at least. "Gathering donations?"

"Not even close! Why would *I* need money like that lot in heaven?! I don't!"

"Oh, I was wrong?" Guess I didn't know, then.

"Idiot, my job is to guide my lost lambs! You're all fidgety and worried, so talk to me! Rely on me!"

She was now giving me a noogie. It didn't hurt at all, but in this position, her chest…

"U-Um…your chest's touching my face."

"It's on purpose."

And she just comes right out with it! This seductress!

"Uh, I'm sorry, Goddess," I said, pulling away from her…attack?

She was always quick to lure me in.

"Why won't you ask me for help when you pray every day?"

"Well, it's sorta a last resort." To be honest, I was scared of incurring debt from relying on her too much.

"It's fine," she soothed, "go right ahead. Don't you worry about debts. You're my only believer."

Noah seemed like she'd have a high interest rate though…

But she was right. I had discounted asking her for advice.

"Can you make me stronger?"

"Hm? I already gave you my blessing, didn't I? I can't do anything else."

"Huh?" That doesn't help at all, then.

"We *can* do this, though." She grinned, suddenly holding something.

"Got my Soul Book again?" This goddess was a total klepto.

"Just a little something-something," she said. *Was she writing?* "Look at this, go on."

She grabbed hold of my head and showed me my Soul Book. Again, she was way too close!

"Just look already!"

"Right… Huh?!"

Water Magic Mastery: 103.

"G-Goddess? What did you do?"

"You're the type to level up to 99 in your RPGs, right?" she asked. "But then, you hit the level cap and got burnt out."

She'd seen straight through me. Well, she *is* a goddess.

Noah chuckled before carrying on.

"One more hint: if you raise that proficiency to 105, you'll be able to see water elementals."

"Huh?!" *I-It was that simple?* But I'd done all that training in the rain, under waterfalls, even spent the whole day in the water.

"You've sure worked hard at that training…even though it was pointless."

"You should have told me!"

All she did was laugh at me. She had a real problem! *Wait, no.*

"Thank you, Goddess," I said, clasping my hands together and bowing deeply.

Now I can keep training my water magic mastery!

"Oh, my. That's much better," she said. "Yup, work hard."

"I *was* struggling this time, so you've really saved me."

"I'm just glad you're happy. You'll need to be careful though."

“Why?” Was she going to come right out with some unreasonable demand?

“Nope, it’s just that those deities in heaven were the ones who decided that the stats in the church Soul Books should cap at 99.”

“Oh, I see.”

“There’s actually no limit on how much you can raise mastery—it depends on the work you put in, but it’s just not shown in numbers. All I did was change your Soul Book a little to reflect levels over 100.”

Now that was what I wanted to hear. It depends on the work I put in, huh? I’m all fired up now!

“Modifying a Soul Book is illegal in the churches of the Sacred Deities,” she warned. “You might end up getting interrogated if they find out.”

“What? Hang on!”

“Also,” Noah added, “worshipping a wicked deity carries the death penalty in Highland and Roses. Savages that they are.”

“Th-The death penalty?! Really?!”

“You didn’t know?”

No, I didn’t! I’d spent the whole time avoiding the church. *I’ll need to be careful.*

“Well, that’s all we have time for.” Her figure soon started to fade.

“It’s always so rushed,” I commented.

“Oh, you wanted to chat for longer?”

“I’d definitely like to have a relaxed chat sometime, yeah.”

She giggled. “You’re getting much nicer. Feel free to keep going and fall for me.”

Quit it with those sidelong looks, it’s bad for my heart.

“Oh! One last thing!”

“What is it?” I asked, expecting her usual vague instructions.

“Head for Labyrinthos next. A fine encounter awaits you.” As she spoke, the goddess vanished.

Huh… That’s really specific.

Maybe her personality was changing.

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“Hey, Makoto, you’ll catch a cold sleeping outside.”

I opened my eyes to find Lucy in front of me. Our surroundings were already dark.

“My bad… Huh? Guess I slept for quite a while.”

“What are you playing at?” she demanded. “You didn’t even show up for dinner… I was worried.” Her expression was somewhere between anger and sadness.

“I was just talking to my goddess.”

“Oh?! What’d she say?”

I didn’t know what to say right then. I figured I’d give her a simple answer now and tell her about the Soul Book later.

“Go to Labyrinthos.”

“The huge maze?” Lucy asked. “That’s great! I’ve been itching to try my skills out.”

“You’re coming too?”

“Huh? Y-You don’t want me to?” She looked on the verge of tears. I’d really rather she not give me that kind of face.

“Well, you’re not one of her believers,” I pointed out, “so you don’t *have* to obey her, do you?”

“It’s fine! The monsters around here aren’t enough anymore!”

Her spells had been just blowing everything away recently. It was almost enough to make me feel sorry for the beasts.

“Let’s go inform the guild about our expedition then.”

“Sure!” she agreed. “You seem happier now too.”

“Oh? I do?”

“Well, you’ve seemed real down recently.”

I must have made her worry, huh? I scratched at my cheek as I realized that our positions had been reversed.

We wandered off, returning to the adventurer’s guild.

“What?! Why are you heading to Labyrinthos all of a sudden?!” Mary demanded, her voice echoing throughout the guild. “There are other dungeons! There’s the Valley of Fire Rats in the Nation of Fire, the Forest of Dryads in the Nation of Wood, and the Cavern of Tundra Tigers closer to home in the Nation of Water.”

“Those dungeons are fine mid rank ones, yes,” I answered.

“Right! You should go for one of them!”

“I’ve already made up my mind, though. We’re headed for Labyrinthos.”

“Lucy, say something,” Mary prodded.

“Makoto’s our party leader, so I’ll follow his lead.”

First I’d heard that I was the leader. Anyway, apparently, Mary agreed.

“Can you deal with the arrangements, Mary?”

“Ugh… You’re both iron rank, so it’s not against the rules…” she muttered before sighing. Despite her complaints, she started work on our excursion.

I guess she didn’t want to encourage me going there.

“Hey, Makoto! I hear you’re heading for Labyrinthos?” Lucas called from a stall next to the guild where he was drinking with Jean.

“We’ll be lonely,” Jean added.

News sure traveled fast.

“Hey, Jean. Where’s Emily?”

The cleric was normally always with him, but right now, she was nowhere to be found.

“She said she was heading off to eat with Lucy.”

“Makes sense. I haven’t seen her either.”

The original bad blood between those two had all flowed away and now they seemed to get on pretty well.

“When are you heading out then?” Lucas asked.

“We haven’t decided yet.” I sat next to them and addressed the stall assistant. “An ale, please.”

I may as well eat with these two.

This stall made stuff like fried chicken, grilled meats, and really flavorful noodles, generally along the lines of Chinese food. An ice-cold ale went perfectly with that fare.

“Have you ever been to Labyrinthos, Lucas?” I asked.

“’Course. You ain’t gonna find a gold ranker that hasn’t. It’s a dungeon that every adventurer in Roses goes for at some point.” His answer came as he gnawed at a big chunk of fried meat on the bone.

“How far did you get?” Jean asked. I wanted to know as well.

“Hmm, Labyrinthos isn’t like a normal dungeon. There aren’t ten or twenty floors, only five. There’s the upper floor, middle, lower, the depths, and the abyss. I went as far down as the depths…but you shouldn’t go that far in yet.”

“I know, past the lower floor, there’s the Nest of Dragons, right?”

It was a famous place, and I’d even learned about it in the Water Temple.

“Yeah, it’s teeming with earth, water, and fire dragons.”

“I’ll pass on that,” I decided.

“The upper floor has quite a few pushovers, though. About all you need to do is keep an eye out for the minotaurs.”

“They’re the guards for the upper floor of Labyrinthos, right?”

“You and Lucy should be able to take one on.” Lucas drained his glass. He sure was tossing them back.

“What about the middle floor?”

“*Variety* is that floor’s characteristic. There are goblins, orcs, man-eating giants, along with undead monsters, like zombies, skeletons, and vampires. On top of that, there are lamiae, arachnae, harpies…and more besides.”

“None of those are very strong, though,” Jean said.

It looked like he thought he could take them on. Maybe he’d come with?

“Don’t be naive—they all come in swarms,” Lucas told him.

“Huh, swarms?”

“Each group has a boss, and that boss orders the whole swarm to attack or retreat. An average adventurer’d get surrounded and eaten in seconds.”

Neither of us replied. *Well,* that *wasn’t terrifying at all…* It stands to reason that the biggest dungeon on the continent would be difficult.

I had never come across monsters that worked together in a group like that. I’d need to gather more info before we went.

“But that’s not all you’ve got to worry about,” Lucas added.

“There’s *more*?”

“It’s important. They hunt new adventurers there.”

“Uh, like older adventurers coming down on cocky rookies?” I thought that was something that happened in pretty much every town.

“Not even close. Labyrinthos is something that adventurers aspire to. They raise their confidence in local dungeons and then splurge on equipment to challenge it, right? Those adventurers get hunted down.”

Well, there’s the darkness of human society. *Maybe people are scarier than the monsters.*

Neither Jean nor I said anything before Lucas continued.

“Mid rank adventurers with cash are easy marks, and the expensive armor makes them obvious. It’s pretty common for higher rank adventurers to pretend to be friendly at first...and then they lure low rankers out to somewhere secluded and take everything they have. The victims are then left for the monsters.”

That’s illegal! Well, a lot of illegal stuff happens in dungeons...

“Makoto! You can’t go!” Jean cried out. Guess the scare got to him.

I was now distinctly less eager as well.

“Best not go if you’re scared,” Lucas cackled. “I tell everyone that wants to beat Labyrinthos the same thing.”

It worried me, honestly. After all, mid rank though we were, Lucy and I still had our fledgling coats on.

Still... I thought. My goddess had given me some concrete instructions for once, and I couldn’t pass up this event. Plus, there’d be a new encounter! I had to try.

“I’m still gonna go,” I said.

“I’ll support you then, but make sure you’re prepared,” Lucas said seriously. “I’ll tell you the main things you need to know.”

“Got it,” I answered. I honestly admired him a lot. He was like a second father to all the adventurers in Macallan.

He spent the next while regaling me with tales of his exploits and scary stories about Labyrinthos.

Lucas and Jean headed off for a second round and I stepped out for some training. But then, Mary grabbed hold of me.

“Come with me, Makoto,” she insisted.

◇

Mary took me to a bar called Asakusa. The name was... Well, forget about it. The place was probably run by some full-on Tokyoite from my old world.

“Cheers,” we toasted together.

It was a quiet bar with a more refined feeling than the Catgirl Cantina or the stalls at the guild. The other customers were all elegantly enjoying their drinks.

I don’t get how to behave in a bar like this... I thought to myself.

For now, I’d decided to order the pretty blue cocktail that the bartender had recommended. The alcohol content of this drink was a little high, and I could feel myself getting tipsy.

“You talked about Labyrinthos with Lucas, right?” Mary asked me.

“I did. He had a lot to tell me. Sounds like a pretty dangerous place.”

“So you’re going, no matter what?”

“Are you against it, Mary?”

She didn’t answer my question, just drained her strong cocktail before muttering something.

“I had a little brother.”

“O-Okay…?” She hadn’t mentioned him before. “An adventurer?”

“That’s right,” she confirmed. “He went off to Labyrinthos three years ago.”

I had no response. Was this going to be…a dark tale?

“It was right after he hit iron rank. He marched off, declaring that he was going to make a name for himself.”

“And…what’s he doing now?”

I could more or less guess, but I asked anyway.

“I don’t know. I haven’t heard from him in ages.”

I lapsed into silence as Mary ordered her second cocktail and quickly gulped about half of it.

An adventurer brother…that she has not heard from in years…

“He promised he’d come back to Macallan at least once a year to see me. At the time, he was called one of the most promising rookies.”

“Oh…he was?”

“He even took down a griffin while in a party of four iron rankers. It was pretty remarkable at the time, don’t you think?”

“R-Right.”

She chuckled. “Though I suppose recently we’ve seen a party of four bronze ranks take one down. Guess you beat his record…”

Argh, what do I even say? I can’t think of anything appropriate. Social anxiety’s awful like this.

“Makoto, are you going to Labyrinthos no matter what?” she asked again. No, this wasn’t a question—she wanted to stop me. I could probably dodge around a response, but she was serious and I wanted to answer her in kind.

“I’m going. I won’t be reckless though.”

“But, aren’t you trying to make a name for yourself?”

“I don’t care about that,” I answered. Fame didn’t matter much to me. I’d take some strong equipment in a heartbeat though.

“Liar! You’re going to Labyrinthos, yet you say that you don’t want fame? You’ll overdo it and never come back! You adventurers are *all* the same!”

“M-Mary?”

“No, I hate it!” she exclaimed. “I don’t want to wait for people that are never coming back! Don’t go!”

Mary’s shouts were attracting looks from all the other patrons.

“Huh, a lover’s spat?” one asked.

“She’s a looker, but the guy’s just a brat,” another added.

“Would you quiet down, perhaps?”

“You two are making a right racket. Take it outside.”

I could hear the complaints coming from all the customers.

“B-Barkeep! The bill!” I called. After I quickly settled our debts, we left Asakusa.

Mary was weeping and sniffling, and it sounded like she was calling someone’s name. I suppose it was…her brother’s?

We sat down on a bench by the canal so she could calm down. Neither of us spoke for a while, but eventually, I broke the silence.

“Mary, I’m a coward, so I plan on sticking to the top floors. I’ll be coming right back.”

“Why are you so insistent on going?” she asked eventually.

“Someone I know is there,” I explained. Or, well, someone I *would* know, according to my goddess.

“Someone you know… A woman?” Mary asked.

“Huh? No, no, no, it’s not…”

Right? It’s not, is it, Goddess?

Annnd Noah ignored me. *Maybe it is a woman?*

“You should have said so from the beginning then,” Mary told me, her expression softening. Guess she was happier again. “I’m sorry that I got so worked up, though.”

“Don’t worry. I get where you’re coming from now that you told me about your brother.”

“Hmm, well, we left the bar, so what do we do now?”

“It’s pretty late. How about we head back?” I suggested.

“Aww, but we’re finally alone,” she complained, grabbing onto my arm. Yup, she was back to normal, phew. “Oh! I know, since we left in a hurry, we can drink at my house instead! Think of it as an apology—I’ll even cook! That’s my specialty, you know?”

“Wh-Whaaa?!”

Going to a woman’s room at this time of night? Well, actually, it was the first time I’d been invited into one at *any* time!

“U-Uhh…” I sputtered.

Wh-What do I do? Can I go through with this?

“That settles it! Come on, let’s go!”

Mary proceeded to drag me along. She’s way stronger than she looks!

I was a bit tipsy too, and I couldn’t exactly say no, considering what she’d told me earlier. If I refused, she’d probably spend the night drinking alone and thinking about how her brother was never coming back.

The thought made me feel like I was abandoning her, so I decided to humor her for a while. Staying until morning would be too much, though.

“Hurray, we’re here!” Mary cheered after a short walk from the bar.

She lived in an apartment building with a brick exterior. It looked rather old-fashioned but still fairly stylish.

“Come on, in you go!”

“You don’t need to push,” I protested. “I *can* walk…”

Just as I was letting myself get shoved toward the door, someone called out and stopped us.

“H-Hey, hold it right there!”

I turned and found a red-haired elf standing behind us.

“Lucy?” I asked. What was she doing here?

“Ugh, Lucy,” Mary added.

“Where do you think you’re taking my Makoto?!”

“Calm down, Lucy,” I said. “Mary was just lonely about her brother not coming home. Let it go.”

“Her brother? Kyle? The guy living it up in the capital after he made a name for himself in Labyrinthos?”

What? That wasn’t quite what it’d sounded like...

“Mary, your brother passed away, didn’t he?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?” Lucy scoffed. “Her brother is a member of the famous Golden Talon party. He’s known as the Emperor of Night in the capital!”

Uh? What on earth? I thought, looking to Mary.

“Wahhh... My cute little brother is nowhere to be found,” she wailed, faking tears.

“Hey! Your brother’s fine, isn’t he?!” I was pretty worried, but you tricked me!

“You need to be a bit more skeptical,” Lucy told me.

“I didn’t lie!” Mary said, defending herself. “I just worded the truth differently!”

That sounded like my goddess all over again. I suppose she *hadn’t* said that he was dead!

“Anyway, what are you doing here, Lucy?” I asked my elf companion.

“M-My inn is around here! I just heard you and Mary, so...”

Mary then spoke up. “Lucy...are you a stalker?”

“I am *not*! Don’t accuse me of things!”

“Uhh, I’m just gonna go to bed,” I said. “I’m tired.”

“Hold it right there,” they commanded in unison.

“Whaaa,” I moaned as the two women grabbed my arms. I just wanted to get some rest.

In the end, the three of us wound up drinking until morning around Mary’s table.

Well, more accurately, I passed out drunk after about an hour.

My head hurts...

◇

Lucy and I were waiting in a plaza outside Macallan’s eastern gate.

“Is here fine?” she asked.

“Hmm, well yeah, according to Fujiyan at least.”

When I’d told him that we were going to Labyrinthos, Fujiyan had immediately insisted on handling the transportation. He’d told us to meet him at noon; Lucy and I were here, but there was no sign of him.

“Maybe he told us the wrong date?” Lucy suggested, but I was sure that wasn’t the case…

“We have five more minutes until the time he told us.”

“Isn’t it a bit weird for him to not already be here? Especially if he’s getting us a carriage or something…”

“You’ve got that right,” I replied. The grassy plains offered an uninterrupted long-distance view, but there was nothing to see. “I guess Fujiyan’s busy, so maybe something came… Huh?”

“What?”

Our surroundings suddenly went dark as something appeared, looming above us.

“Whaaaaaat?!” Lucy cried out.

“Whoa…” I managed.

It was an absolutely enormous flying ship.

Its massive sails were full of air, and they puffed out and fluttered in the breeze. As the craft floated above us, the white hull glistened in the sunlight.

“An airship?!” Lucy exclaimed.

“Hey, Lucy, do boats fly in this world?”

“Like hell they do! But only royals and the military have airships…” she managed to say while staring up, agape.

To own something like that… Fujiyan sure was doing well for himself.

“Yahoo!”

Someone jumped off the ship?!

I was worried that they’d break their legs, but the figure landed elegantly.

That was damn cool. The person turned out to be a rabbit-eared female beastman.

“Nina!” I called out.

“Mister Takatsuki, Miss Lucy. I came to pick you up’h!”

“Where’s Fujiyan?”

“He’s on the ship—ah! That’s dangerous’h!”

Fujiyan jumped out too?! Unlike Nina, though, he didn’t drop naturally. Rather, he drifted to the floor, as if he was using some kind of item, before landing with a thud.

“Fujiyan!” I yelled out to him. “What a ship!”

“Aha ha, truly, truly. I maintained its secrecy for the surprise it would cause. My esteemed Tackie, Lucy, you will be aboard for its maiden voyage!”

“Wooow! We should be able to get all the way there on this,” Lucy marveled.

“Sorry about the trouble,” I apologized awkwardly. “I didn’t want to ask so much of you.”

“Perish the thought!” Fujiyan said, dismissing my concern. “The locomotion of this vessel is provided by the huge magicite that your giant acquaintance gifted us! Without it, the ship would languish, incomplete!”

Magicite, more like the giant’s finger...

“Oh, so that’s how you’re doing it.”

I’d noticed that he had been pretty busy recently, but I suppose he’d just been building this airship.

As we chatted excitedly, a crowd from town gathered around us.

I guess it does stand out a bit.

A fine carriage soon appeared, parting the crowd of milling people, and a noble-looking woman stepped out. She approached Fujiyan and greeted him with a smile.

“Mr. Fujiwara, congratulations on the completion of your airship.”

“Oh, Ms. Christina. It is only due to your kind assistance that the ship was completed. I shall use this ship to allow Macallan to develop even further.”

“That is heartening to hear, but please, call me Chris.”

“A lowly merchant such as myself could never do such a thing,” Fujiyan countered politely.

“Does our relationship mean nothing?” she replied.

The two of them continued their conversation. I guess she was an acquaintance of his?

“Hey, Lucy, who’s Fujiyan talking to?”

“What? You don’t know?” Lucy asked in shock. *Was this woman famous or something?*

I could tell she was fairly high in society at least.

“She’s Lord Macallan’s second daughter. Her name’s Christina Macallan’h. She’s a hussy that’s after the boss’h,” Nina explained unhappily.

Oh, a lord’s daughter? That would make her a noble. That’s Fujiyan all right—friends in high places.

Plus, Nina was blatantly jealous that he was getting all the ladies.

“Fujiyan sure has connections!” Lucy exclaimed easily.

“Boss, shouldn’t we get going’h?” Nina urged.

“You’re quite right. Farewell, Ms. Chris. We can continue our discussion upon my return.”

“Indeed, I look forward to hearing your tales,” the noble’s daughter answered. She shook his hand with a smile.

“Booosss, come on’h,” Nina exclaimed, growing angry at the sight and tugging at his arm.

With a smile, Chris said to her, “Nina, please take care of Mr. Fujiwara on your travels.”

“I will. I won’t let *anyone* lay a finger on him’h,” Nina replied with a grin of her own.

The two of them chuckled.

They both looked fairly amiable at a glance, but if you kept looking, it was obvious that wasn't the case.

Ugh, terrifying.

I couldn't see Fujiyan's face from where I was, but I wondered what kind of expression that Casanova was sporting.

Don't build your harem in this world!

"Let's head off then, Lucy," I offered.

"Yup, I'm looking forward to it!" she exclaimed as we boarded the ship.

◇

"Whaaaa, we're so high and flying so fast!"

Lucy was standing at the airship's prow, spreading her arms in the wind. Was she in *Titanic* or something? Also, that didn't seem very safe...

"Miss Lucy! Please don't stand so close to the edge, it's dangerous'h."

Must be, since she got a warning from Nina.

I kept my hand on the railing as I enjoyed our trip through the sky. The rushing wind felt incredible.

"How is the ride, my esteemed Tackie?" Fujiyan asked.

"It's quiet. The whole ship barely rocks at all."

"Well, it *is* powered by magic. Defensive sorcery means that we need not concern ourselves with harsh winds either," he said proudly.

This ship was honestly worth the pride; it was a big accomplishment.

"Who's piloting, by the way?" I asked.

"The beastmen I hired for that purpose, of course. You see the winged one over there, correct?"

There *were* several beastmen around the ship with wings on their backs. All of them were girls, by the way.

Fujiyan...your fetish is showing.

"A mere coincidence," he insisted.

I guess he read my mind.

"Lying is wrong, Fujiyan."

"Well," he admitted eventually, confessing readily, "I was the one that hired the girls, true."

Ha ha, I see right through you. "Oh, you lothario. You were living it up with that Chris woman earlier as well."

Back in high school, both of us had lamented our lack of interaction with girls. *My, how the tables turn.*

When he heard my comment about Chris, Fujiyan's face became conflicted.

"Matters with Lady Christina are slightly more complex than they seem," he told me.

He explained the circumstances within the Macallan family: the lord had three daughters, but his heir was currently undecided.

"Wouldn't the eldest usually inherit?" I asked.

"That depends on the family. It seems that for the Macallans, the heir will be the one who most develops the town."

“I see. So that’s why Chris is friendly with you—she wants results.”

“She’s a gold digger’h! The rumors are that Boss has more money than the lord right now’h!” Nina exclaimed, cutting into the conversation.

Her long ears must make her hearing rather sharp.

Lucy had pretty sharp hearing too, now that I thought about it, so I couldn’t let anything slip. *Those keen-eared girls!*

“Building this ship wasn’t the only thing. We also had to secure the routes, which in turn required speaking to the people that own the rights. Otherwise, I would be unable to trade,” Fujiyan explained while scratching his head.

“Still, thanks to your efforts, the country’s first passenger airship is now a reality’h!” Nina added excitedly, before growing sadder. “Even if you did end up in a lot of debt to that woman’h…”

“Lady Nina, I cannot have you denigrate my sponsor,” he warned her.

“You’ve got it tough, don’t you,” I mused. Speaking both in terms of his business and about his relationships with women.

“By the way!” Lucy called, cutting across the conversation. “What’s this ship named?”

“Aha ha, I am glad you asked!” Fujiyan cheered. He’d obviously wanted to change the subject. “Her name is Saint Kanon! The white wings that soar across the continent!”

“That’s a wonderful name!” Lucy replied.

“That’s my boss!” Nina added to the praise.

Saint Kanon... Considering that “Hijiri” and “saint” were written with the same character in Japanese, he probably got the name from one of his favorite waifu game heroines, Kanon Hijiri.

Those thoughts passed through my mind, and Fujiyan met my gaze before averting his eyes.

“It’s a good name,” I offered.

“Well, I suppose it works,” he deflected.

I *did* think it was a good name, though.

“Won’t monsters attack the ship?” Lucy asked.

“A good question, milady! The airship’s prodigious size is a measure against them. We plan to use it as a passenger ship in the future, so the rooms *were* needed, but it was also built to such a size so that wyverns and griffins would not attack it.”

Makes sense. It wasn’t just to house the number of crew.

“What about dragons, though?” I asked. I’d heard that dragons were the pinnacle of monsters, beasts that knew no fear and simply destroyed all in their path.

“Our routes have been planned to avoid dragon territory. The ship as a whole is protected by magic, and the winged beastmen are also combatants, so we can fight back if monsters were to assail us.”

“Oh, well thought out,” I told him. I could relax then.

“How long will it take us to get to Labyrinthos?”

“Approximately another day. I believe we should arrive tomorrow, in the morning.”

“Wow! It’s about a week from Macallan by horse.”

“Well, we are unhindered by the road and may simply take a straight path, so our pace is only natural,” he explained.

That’s great!

“Now,” he continued, “allow me to give you the tour! We will be providing a lavish feast tonight as well.”

“Yay!” Lucy yelled out, cheering like a child.

Honestly, I wanted to follow suit. For a while, we enjoyed ourselves on our trip through the skies.

Chapter 2: Aya Sasaki Awakens in Another World

◇ Aya Sasaki's Perspective ◇

It was freezing. This bus had no heating, and I was shivering.

Why did this happen...?

The heat had stopped working in the middle of a blizzard, and now, a freezing wind was blowing in through a broken window.

My hands were numb as my breath plumed into white clouds. The air was cold enough that it hurt my lungs.

No one would be able to bear this.

Well, Takatsuki's still playing games.

He'd been my best friend in class since middle school, and he was currently playing a video game, just like he would always do during any lunch break.

He'd been having some silly conversation with Fujiwara until a few moments ago, but they'd quieted down now.

Fujiwara probably didn't have the energy anymore.

The only sounds were the howling wind and Takatsuki tapping the buttons on his console.

Maybe I should say one last thing to him?

Come on, don't just play. Look over here.

It's super cold, right? Are you shivering?

Hmm, maybe something cuter?

Are you enjoying that game? I can never get into RPGs.

I wanted to play games with him again.

I'm jealous of him. Both his parents work late, so he gets to play on his own into the night.

Takatsuki...

Hey...

Look...this way...

Let me...hear you...one last time...

The words came to my mind, but none of them left my lips.

I can't...

My mind descended into darkness.

◇

There was no light when I woke up. Pitch black. I couldn't see anything, but I could still think.

What? This is scary.

I couldn't move my hands. Or my legs. It was like I didn't even exist.

Am I alive? Or have I died?

Oh, I can move my body. That's good—I'm probably alive.

It feels bizarre though.

I turned over and it felt like I'd twisted twice. Almost like my body had gotten really long…

I'm probably just imagining things, I eventually thought. I just need to ask someone where I am.

I'd been trapped in a bus before I'd passed out, according to my memories, so this must have been a hospital or something.

No, it couldn't be. It wasn't anything *like* that.

Anyway, I need to get out!

I wasn't entirely sure how I was moving, but I thrashed around nonetheless.

Crack!

I heard a harsh sound as I broke through something and leaped outside.

Yeah, it's dark. I can't see anything.

It wasn't the complete blackness of earlier; I could see some faint light. Not enough to tell where I was though. I crawled forward with a fuzzy feeling in my head.

I heard a voice from above. "Oh, so *you* are the fastest of your sisters, my child."

I peered up to where the voice had come from.

There was a huge, beautiful woman up there. Someone that looked like a Hollywood actress. Despite her beauty, she gave off the impression of being somewhat harsh. I didn't recognize her either.

"My adorable child, show me your face."

No, no, no.

My mom's more Japanese-looking, and she's of a more normal height. She wasn't someone that could turn literally every head as she passed in the street!

But this woman… Her figure was like a westerner, with the chest, waist, and hi— *Hang on?*

Wasn't she a bit too pale?

And…not wearing clothes?

With…a strange…lower half?

She had, uh, scales, and, well, no legs…

"Oh my, it would seem that your siblings are awakening as well."

My siblings? I was the eldest and had four younger brothers. They used to play with me a lot but stopped wanting to hang out with their older sister as we got bigger. I'd felt a little bit abandoned by them recently.

They used to be like, "Siiiisss! Let's play!"

But now, they wouldn't even play video games with me anymore.

I'd complained to Takatsuki about that a fair bit, hadn't I? Oh, I wonder if he's safe?

The sight of him playing his handheld right 'til the end came back to my mind. Seriously, he'd always been so focused on his games, tee hee.

While I was pondering that, I turned around, not really thinking about anything else.

And that’s why I couldn’t understand what was happening.

There were many, *many,* ***many*** of my siblings, right there in front of me.

They had no limbs.

They were crawling along the ground.

They had slick bodies and long eyes.

Their tongues flicked out...

They were snakes.

All around me were...snakes. Snakes. Snakes.

“Worms are gross.”

“They’re kinda muddy-tasting, yeah.”

My sisters had all been tiny snakes when they’d been born, but now, their upper halves looked like cute little girls. The things they would talk about were far from cute though. *They eat frogs and bugs!*

I wasn’t an ordinary snake anymore either. I’d shed my skin several times, and now, I was also a human from the waist up.

“Come here, little sisters. It’s dinner time,” we all heard.

We young children were fed by our sisters (older lamiae), and we ate whatever they brought back.

Our great mother didn’t work, as a rule. After all, she was our alpha and our pillar!

We didn’t seem to have a father. I’d asked an older sister about it once, and she’d looked at me with a scary face and had told me not to mention it in front of mother. I guess there’s a story behind that?

Right, dinner time. We were growing kids, after all, only being a few months old.

Food for us youngsters consisted of… Rats, frogs, lizards, spiders, caterpillars, songbirds, some carp-looking fish, and a mound of fruits.

“Yayyy!” my sisters cheered as they swarmed the food. I gave it all a sidelong look and considered for a moment.

I guess that looks edible…?

I selected a bunch of fruit and nibbled away at it. This wouldn’t give me enough nutrients though. Helplessly, I looked over the rest, trying to find something that I could eat.

I just can’t… I thought with a mental sigh.

Lamiae didn’t use heat to cook their food—they usually just swallowed things whole.

I chewed on a little fish that I thought I could eat while watching my sisters gulp down rats and frogs. *Ugh… this is awful.* I was a full lamia, so this food wouldn’t *harm* me, but it was far from appetizing when compared with memories of meals from my previous life.

Then, one day…

Oh, they’re carrying something with them? I thought. I saw that my older sisters were dragging a sack that seemed to contain some heavy creature. They must’ve been taking it to the great mother. I’d seen similar things before.

Rare foods were always taken to Mother.

Last time, it had been a huge cow. A bipedal one though.

“It’s called a minotaur!” one of my sisters had proudly explained to us. “Our second sister is the only one that could’ve slain something like that!”

Our “second sister” was essentially our leader, the most important after Mother. She was our second-in-command.

“Mother, we have acquired superb food.” She opened the bag.

Guh!

“@#%!#@$~~@!#$?!!?!”

Out from the sack sprung an armored man. I couldn’t understand what he was saying, but he yelled something.

“Oh, he *is* a lively one,” the great mother purred, wrapping her long body around him and gently stroking his hair.

The human’s face paled in fear and he started to shake.

Mother's mouth split into a grin before, in the next moment, she swallowed him whole.

"Wha?"

M-Mother just...ate...a...human?

Ahhhh... Ahhhhh...

I didn't know what to do.

I'd thought that this world might just be full of monsters, but no, apparently there were humans as well.

Also, it seemed like they were part of our diet.

"I wonder what humans taste like?"

"I bet they're super nice."

"Our sisters have eaten some."

"No faiiiirr."

"I want to head out hunting already!"

My sisters' voices all sounded so innocent, but the actual topic of their conversation was just the worst.

"I'm never going to be able to live with humans, am I..." I sighed.

I'd considered that, if humans were around in this world, I might be able to sneak out and head for a town. *The food here is just depressing!*

But I saw how scared that human had been. Also, Mother had eaten him in a single gulp.

At this point, I realized that coexistence was a pipe dream.

"You seem down. What's wrong?" the second sister asked me.

I gave a hurried excuse. "N-Nothing, I just want to head out as well."

"Hmm, you *were* the quickest to hatch. I suppose you should all start to catch your own food soon."

Oh? Would I be able to leave? I'd actually never gone beyond this nest.

My home was essentially just a gloomy cave. It was large enough, but we weren't allowed outside because it was "dangerous."

"I think we can take you all out tomorrow," the second sister said. "Tell your sisters." With that, she left.

What? Do I need to tell all of them? Ugh, what a pain. Still... I want to leave this place!

When we finally ventured outside, my sisters were all cheering and playing around.

"Wooow."

"It's so big!"

"Look at that lake, it's huge! Sister, can we swim?"

Personally, I was staring at the sight in front of me, dumbfounded.

"Whoa..."

It seemed that our home was a cave behind a huge waterfall. The rumbling noise from vast quantities of gushing water became noticeable as we headed toward the entrance. The spray and mist made everything take on a dull white hue.

If anyone tried to leave our cave directly, they'd get beaten down into the basin by the flow of water, so instead, we followed a path along the side.

"Niagara Falls?" I muttered.

I'd never seen it myself, but the utter wall of water in front of me brought to mind the biggest waterfalls from my old world. The huge downpour had created a massive lake as well. I'd have never believed that there would be such a large body of water underground like this!

Wow! Just, wow! This world is incredible!

An older sister soon called to us. "Come on! Don't space out—get over here!" Her words hurried me along and didn't give me the chance to admire the scenery.

Once we'd all gathered, our sister began to explain the situation. "These are your hunting grounds." She then pointed out an open area near the lake, but this spot didn't have water falling on it.

"Waheeey!" my other sisters cheered together before scattering.

"Don't go too far! There are monsters in the deep water!"

Aren't we monsters too, though? I thought, but I didn't say anything. That'd be stupid.

So, I proceeded to hop and spring across the rocks. I wondered if there would be any fish, but the turbulence from the falling water made it hard to peer into the depths. I jerked my head upward. Multiple waterfalls surrounded the vast lake, cascading into it, and above them, I could see the sun shining down.

Things must be open up there.

I gazed vacantly up at the first sunlight I'd seen in ages. Black silhouettes were flying around up there as well. Maybe they were large birds? The black shapes were flying in circular arcs.

"Girls! Back inside!" our sister suddenly called in a panic. "Harpies!"

By the time I'd parsed out what she'd said, it was too late.

"Gyaaahh!" came a strange cry. In front of my eyes was a monster with the top half of a woman and the bottom of a bird.

"Wha! Whaaaa?!"

Before I knew it, the harpy's feet had wrapped around my body and I was high in the air.

"Everyone, back inside. She's done for!"

Hey! That's me you're talking about! Aren't you giving up on me too quickly? Sister?!

The woman-bird carrying me had a beautiful face that soon twisted into a vicious laugh.

Damn... She's messing with me because she thinks I'm a kid!

"Take that!" I yelled out, forcefully wrenching her talons apart. *Huh, she's totally weak!*

"What?!"

While she was stunned by surprise, I wrapped my snake tail around her, then began to constrict.

“L-Let go!” she screeched.

Well, that *ain’t happening.* Entwined together, we both fell toward the water and impacted the surface of the lake without our positions changing. The landing was a little rough, but I was unscathed, and I managed to escape the harpy’s grasp.

Great, now time to run!

I swam through the water, heading for home behind the waterfall.

“Gyargh!”

I looked behind me and witnessed the harpy being eaten by a huge crocodile-looking monster. The poor thing had been dragged under, and blood was pluming in the water, alongside feathers from her wings.

Whaaat?! What’s that?! Get it away! Where’d that thing come from?!

I frantically fled and met up with my sisters. They all congratulated me for bringing down a harpy on my first hunt.

That’s nothing to be happy about! What’s with this world?!

It was the day after my fight to the death(?) with the harpy. Apparently, I was now seen as an asset, so the second sister had brought me on a hunt with the older lamiae. The trip wore fairly heavily on me, and I just had to sigh. There were so many dangerous monsters outside! Still, I was able to finish off some orcs and goblins with my older sisters.

That hunt had really taken it out of me today…

“Wooowww,” the rest of my broodmates cheered, looking respectfully at me. This wasn’t something I was really celebrating, though. I wasn’t great at fighting, but I’d realized that I was much stronger than a normal lamia.

Mother had even said, “Your stats are rather high compared to the others.”

Stats? What are they?

Mother didn’t tell me, and instead, just looked away at something.

The following days were spent with the second sister training me to hunt.

Once we were done each day, I always had some free time, and I’d look out through a gap in the waterfall. I could faintly see the sunlight from this spot, and it was a much more comforting scene than the gloomy place where I slept.

At least the completely majestic view and the roar of the crashing water blew away my depressed feelings.

There was a huge splash as a massive reptile broke the surface of the lake. It was a sea serpent.

What’s one of those doing here?!

The lame quip didn’t leave my lips because, after all, this *was* a fantasy world. But incidentally, sea serpents were snakes in the same way as lamiae, so they weren’t aggressive toward us. A peaceful reaction to our

kind was far from the norm, though. The dungeon was usually full of enemies.

There were arachnae, harpies, lizardmen, orcs, and ogres. All of those monsters treated the lake as a sort of rest area, and so we all fought over it. Us lamiae and the harpies were on particularly bad terms. It was odd, as I'd have thought we could get on well since both of our species were demi-humans.

Regardless, the "queen of the harpies" and our mother the "queen of the lamiae" clashed like a cat and dog. They'd been fighting for years.

"Takatsuki would like this world..." I mused, remembering my game-loving classmate. He'd adored RPGs. I know that he'd have been overjoyed to come to a world like this.

"Sasa! Let's explore a dungeon!"

Yup... That's definitely something he'd say...

A smile made its way onto my face as I thought of my friend from junior high.

I wonder what happened to him? Maybe he was reincarnated as some other monster? It's all so overwhelming.

"Gyaaah!" came a piercing scream.

Oh, the sea serpent got a goblin.

This world was actually really bloody, despite the fantasy setting.

Sigh... I want to go to bed.

"Human disguise magic?" I asked. It was several months after our first outing, and my sisters and I were now all used to hunting.

The second sister had brought up something rather interesting. Something that I was excited to hear.

"Humans can sometimes defeat us if we just attack them upfront. Their strength varies. There are weak humans, but also amazingly strong ones."

Right, right.

"So you need to use human disguise magic when hunting so as to not let your guard down. Like this." She murmured something and a pale beauty appeared in her place between one blink and the next.

Ooooh! Wow! She transformed into a human!

She had legs now, and there was no indication of her being a lamia. She was also naked, by the way.

"You need to wrap some cloth around yourself when you're disguised as a human. Wearing nothing will shock them."

Obviously! I thought, but my sisters were nodding and taking it in stride. I suppose it was a difference in species... *Anyway, could I use this?!*

If only I could master that magic... I eagerly asked her to teach me.

"You're good at this," our second sister commented, impressed with my progress. My sisters were still working at their glamours, but I'd succeeded easily.

“I can’t picture a human.”

“We’ve never seen one properly.”

“How do legs work?”

I ended up needing to teach them. Well, I used to be human after all, so I could thank my previous life for this knowledge.

I’d have rather been a human in this life as well...

“Are you going to come on human hunts, then?” my sister asked.

I panicked. H-Human hunting?!

“N-Not yet. I was actually attacked by a human before, so I’m scared...”

It was a barefaced lie that I could only use because I’d been allowed out on my own recently. I’d not actually met a person yet, but sometimes I saw them when my sisters caught one.

I really don’t want to become a monster that attacks humans...

I didn’t have the resolve or the courage to be that. Besides, I’d given up on coexistence with humans before, but with disguise magic, it seemed possible again.

If I put on my glamour, I’d just look like a pale-skinned girl.

Maybe I’d even be able to live in a human town!

The disguise did have a time limit, though—when my “mana” ran out, the illusion would come undone. It was lucky, then, that I apparently had higher stats than my sisters, so my glamour would probably last a long time.

Was this my chance?

I decided to wait in secret for an opportunity to escape. The next problem, though, was language. I couldn’t understand when humans spoke in this world. I was worried about what to do, but my sisters solved that as well.

“Here, this will teach you human language,” said a sister, handing me a book.

You have books *for that?!* I thought, but it made sense—use their language to trick them.

“You just need to tell a human man, ‘Help me, I’ll do anything in return!’ and you’ll be fine.”

“I...I see...”

Men were easy to understand, weren’t they? I guess that’s how it was, though.

Since my goal was to live in a human town, I worked extra hard on learning their language. Even my sisters wondered why I was putting so much effort into it.

I’m sorry, everyone, but I won’t be here for much longer.

I was getting better at hunting, and I seemed to have some kind of strange ability; when I slithered, I was so much faster than my sisters, as long as I put in a little more effort. I could even double-jump in the air, and if I held my fist tight and built up my strength for a while, I could punch a harpy about a hundred meters back.

“How can you do all of that?” my sisters had wondered. It wasn’t an ability that lamiae had, in general.

“Well, that’s what we call a skill,” Mother had told us. She knew everything. Well, she *had* been alive for three hundred years after all!

That’s right. Mother was three hundred years old. She just had this presence about her, and however strong I was, I was nothing in comparison.

Whoops, I got off-topic.

“What’s a skill?” I asked.

“Monsters are sometimes born with unusual powers. Humans have them too, but you shouldn’t get involved with a human that has strong skills.”

Oh, that sounds important! This power was a skill, then. Humans have them too, so maybe I got it because I used to be a human. Well, whatever, it meant that I could take on anyone around here.

“My children have been attacked less since you were born. You’re a good girl,” praised Mother.

Survival of the fittest was the rule in this world. It was no metaphor since weak monsters were hunted and eaten. We lamiae weren’t fragile creatures, but we weren’t the toughest either. There were lots of monsters stronger than us in this dungeon.

So, we had to band together because of that. Mother, our second sister, and all our older sisters had said the same thing.

We younger sisters nodded.

Sorry, I won’t be here for long, though.

I gave a figurative bow to my family.

My initial reaction to my new life had been fear. I hadn’t known where I was, and I’d been suddenly reincarnated as some monster I’d never seen before.

In my mind, I’d cursed god. Why was I a snake of all things?

After I’d lived it for a while, though, I realized that lamiae were actually a family-oriented species.

Life in the dungeon was difficult, but we all helped each other. Eventually, I became glad that I’d been reincarnated as a lamia.

I’ll pay this family back as much as possible.

On one occasion, a huge lizard had been attacking my sisters. “Hiyah!” I’d yelled, throwing a single punch and taking out the beast.

During another skirmish, I’d shouted, “Take that!” before striking down a flock of harpies that had attacked my sisters.

Yet another time, I’d screamed “Die!” as I’d hurled rocks at the swarm of arachnae attacking us.

“You’re so tough.”

“I want to be just as strong!”

“But you hardly eat…”

That was what my broodmates had to say, but it wasn’t just them—my older sisters had started relying on me as well.

Before I knew it, I was third-in-command of the lamiae. I'd probably gotten carried away, so I hadn't noticed it myself, but the second sister was starting to become jealous of me.

"Soon, I think..." I murmured.

I was strong now, probably amongst the most powerful in the family.

If I faced any of the monsters around the lake one-on-one, I wouldn't lose.

The sisters who'd hatched alongside me had grown up as well, and they were now all used to hunting.

Mother would be laying the next generation of children soon.

And once that happened, we'd be the older sisters. I was sure that I'd get attached to the younger sisters, and then it would be hard to leave.

I decided that the next time I ventured out alone, I'd escape.

"It's awful! They've been attacked by tundra tigers!"

The yell had been sudden. I wasn't on hunting duty that day, but when I rushed out, I found several of my sisters dead.

Tundra tigers were blue-furred great cats that possessed an ice breath attack. Our clans normally lived a significant distance from each other, so all of us must have come into contact by coincidence.

The white breath of the tigers slowed my movements.

As I sent one flying, I angrily yelled, "What do you think you're doing?!"

The other tundra tigers saw their compatriot downed by a single blow, and so they all turned tail and ran away.

"Everyone..." I mumbled, slowly moving toward the corpses of my sisters. It was a cruel sight; the tigers had torn them apart and eaten their guts. Even those who'd survived were all battered. "Why...why...?"

"Tundra tigers are natural predators of lamiae. Their breath makes the area colder and slows us down," the second sister explained regretfully.

What...? I never knew that...

Seeing my sisters dead, feeling the surge of sadness and anger...it got me all fired up.

"Why didn't you tell us ahead of time?!"

"It's the rule of the hunt," said the second sister. "You shouldn't make assumptions until you know your enemy. You'll get stronger through experience."

"No!" I argued. "If you'd told them, they wouldn't have died!"

"So you're saying I'm wrong?!"

"I am! You're wrong!"

It was the first time I'd gone against the second sister. The rule of lamiae was to follow your elder's instructions, and I'd broken it. But I just couldn't keep calm with my sisters lying there dead.

I could have saved them if I'd been here! I thought, utterly serious.

"You don't know anything!" the second sister yelled back at me.

“You’re so stubborn!” I exclaimed. “You killed everyone!”

“And you’d have done better?!”

“Well, at least things would have gone better than what you managed!”

Normally, the second sister would have just sighed and waved off my outburst, but this time, she grew angry.

“Why, you!” With a shout, she punched me.

“What are you doing?!” I replied in kind, hitting her back.

At that point, things devolved into a complete fistfight.

“H-Hey!”

“No!”

“Quit it, you two!”

Our sisters tried to stop us, but no one could intervene in a fight between the second and third of the family.

The second sister was strong. I didn’t know how old she was, but she had way more years behind her than I did. She’d led the lamiae for a long time.

Mother’s appearance might’ve been far more extravagant, but the second sister gave a colder impression, and she was more slender.

Her pretty face was warped by rage as she grabbed at my hair and yanked me up.

As for me, I hadn’t even lived as a lamia for two years yet.

Though I was fully grown physically after about half a year, I normally wouldn’t have been able to fight against her. However, my high stats and these “skills” meant that I was now on even footing with the second sister.

We both yanked at the other’s hair and wound our tails around each other, raining down blows on our opponent.

Finally, just as my consciousness had started to fade, I landed a hit that made her collapse completely.

“I…I won…” I managed, before following suit and crumpling.

“What *were* you both thinking?”

We both got a significant lecture from Mother after that. I didn’t look at the second sister, and she didn’t look at me.

“Come on, you’re both the core of this family, so you need to be friendly.”

Mother didn’t care about the specific circumstances and was just looking at us, disappointed. Neither the second sister nor I said a word until the lecture finished. I eventually gave an insincere apology, and the second sister simply replied, “You’re forgiven.”

After that, though, I didn’t talk with her again.

Since our fight, the family had split into factions.

One was a group supporting the second sister.

The others focused on me.

Her group kept the status quo, where the younglings would take the lead and the older girls stood back and supported them.

I, on the other hand, led the hunts for my group.

At first, I thought my group was better since we suffered fewer casualties. I was wrong, though. The other group had more individual successes.

By contrast, my group all relied on me.

I guess I failed...

I was happy for them to lean on me, but it wouldn't work in the long term because it meant that I couldn't leave.

Maybe the second sister was right...

Even when we passed each other, neither of us spoke to the other for days. We'd gotten on so well in the past... I tried to find some opportunity to get her alone and apologize, but I couldn't find the chance. Lately, she was always accompanied by someone...

But she was paying more attention to me as well.

I should apologize first, right? I'm younger, after all.

Seeing no other choice, I finally went over to her and whispered into her ear. "Hey, I want to talk to you alone, come to the waterfall."

"Wh-Why?! Here works just fine," she replied, taken aback.

Ugh, no way. It's way too embarrassing to apologize in front of everyone.

"Come to the waterfall tonight, sister."

"Fine," she nodded eventually, with an unhappy look on her face. But I'd decided—even if she gave me that look, I'd apologize to her anyway.

Right, it's time to end the fight between us.

So I went to bed and waited for our meeting. I was tired from the last few days of hunting though and soon nodded off.

Ahh! I thought as I regained consciousness. *Damn, did I oversleep?*

I shot up in a hurry and noticed something strange.

It's...cold?

Our home was near a lava flow, so it should always be warm. We were cold-blooded, after all, so this was the first time I'd experienced the lower temperature.

"Hey! Everyone! Mother!" I called, searching around and wanting to warn my sisters.

"Wha...?"

I felt my breath stop.

The sight in front of me was like a nightmare. Everyone's skin had paled to a pallid white, and they weren't breathing either...it looked like.

Wh...Why? What happened?

Some of my sisters that were still breathing had been attacked by harpies. They couldn't fight back in that state.

"Where did you come from?!" I demanded, addressing the harpies. No creature could get inside our nest unless someone from our family opened the way. Our enemies were fully barred from entry.

The harpies just cackled shrilly.

“Damn!”

I tried to take up a normal fighting stance, but my body felt like lead, and my flesh was screaming from the cold.

“Mother!”

I can’t do it, Mother, help!

As I looked for her, I spied an unfamiliar woman on the throne. She was no less good-looking than our mother.

However, the queen of the lamiae had fallen at this usurper’s feet.

“Mother!” I cried again, trying to rush over, but the harpies caught me.

“Let me go!” I writhed in their grasp.

“Oh, are you the little snakeling that’s been tormenting my family?” said the harpy on the throne.

“Who are you…?”

“I’m the queen of the harpies,” she answered before chuckling. “We’ve been fighting the lamiae for three hundred years, and now that hateful woman lies before me.”

“Ugh…” Mother cried as the woman calling herself queen of the harpies kicked her prone body.

“M-Mother!”

“It’s you…? Run…” was all she managed to say.

“Aha ha ha! Watch. Watch and witness your mother’s final moments!”

As the harpy queen spoke, she thrust her hand into the great mother’s chest and gouged out her heart.

“Arrrghh!” Mother screamed.

Stopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopit!

“What a wonderful color,” the harpy remarked. With a vicious bite, she began to consume Mother’s heart!

And with that, the queen of the lamiae fell flat and moved no more.

“You won’t get away with this!” I hissed.

“Now, now, you are all that’s left.”

“What?” I looked around.

My siblings were dead. My elder sisters? Dead. My mother? Dead. I was the only lamia still moving.

They were all gone…

“No…” I protested weakly.

“You sure are a lively one. And yet you are so young. Perhaps you’re a mutant.”

The harpy queen had a point. My heart froze.

I’m the only one alive… I’m the only one that can move.

What was I doing? I needed to get revenge.

“Right! Sister! Second sister, help!” I called. She was our ever-reliable second-in-command. So what was she doing?

Then, the queen of the harpies answered my question. “The eldest daughter of your family, well, she invited us in.”

After a long pause, I only managed to sputter out a brief noise.

…What did she just say?

“And here I thought that lamiae had strong familial bonds,” the harpy queen said, her voice touched with pity.

That was impossible. She would never do that.

The second sister was always protecting us… No matter what, she’d never betray us!

“She just wanted us to kill a cheeky child, but it was you siblings that ended up killing each other. Thus ends the lamiae.”

I couldn’t accept what she was saying.

It can’t be! It can’t be! It can’t be! It can’t be!

My emotions were a mess, and I just couldn’t hold them in any longer.

I flung away the harpies that were holding me, and then I leaped for the queen, but she didn’t panic at all.

“Hey, it’s not cold enough,” she called out.

I looked over to where she’d addressed her remark.

“A human mage?!” I cried.

The mage was holding a staff, and they launched a spell at me.

“We harpies aren’t so good with magic,” said the queen. “Then again, nor are you snakelings.”

The magic hit me, and suddenly, I couldn’t move.

“Goodbye then, final lamia.”

Those were the last words I heard before the harpy queen’s sharp talons bit into my skin.

I died again.

Irritatingly, my second life had also ended surrounded by freezing ice.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Arrives at Labyrinthos

A lavish feast was served on the airship, and I ate and drank to my heart's content.

As night fell, Lucy and I were shown to individual suites. Mine was a room filled with posh furniture and a soft, fluffy bed. It was worlds apart from my usual sleeping arrangement of huddling on the floor in the guildhall.

I can't get used to the difference!

"Can't sleep," I muttered bluntly.

I'd mostly sobered up and now felt wide awake, so I stepped out to enjoy the night breeze. Apparently, monsters could attack the ship if we left the lights on, so the ones across the deck had been extinguished. My surroundings were rendered pitch-black.

Several beastmen with bird features were standing around the deck as lookouts. Did they have night vision too?

The night shift's gotta suck.

I leaned on the railing and looked down past the ship. Flying over the ink-black nothingness made me feel uneasy. Without any towns below us, there were no lights in sight.

A voice spoke up from the darkness. "It is not like Japan, is it?"

"Oh, Fujiyan."

The owner of the ship had appeared from behind me with an expensive-looking wine held in his hand.

"So? How would you feel about a nightcap?" he asked.

"Just a drop," I told him. Fujiyan had become a real drinker.

He and I plonked ourselves down directly onto the deck, and he poured us both a glass, relying on the moonlight.

We tapped our drinks together with a slight *ching*.

"At night, the stars and moon are spectacular in this world, are they not?"

"You can't even see the stars in Tokyo," I replied.

I miss that sky…back in Tokyo with no stars.

Even in this world, though, there were barely any chances to sit back and stargaze.

Keeping that in mind, perhaps moments like this were more precious than I'd thought.

"And yet, to think, such a gorgeous sight as that moon is seen as an ill omen to this world," Fujiyan mused. "Truly mysterious."

"Moon magic is the least popular, right?"

Moon-aligned magic was the element among the seven which dealt with death and darkness. No one had taken the moon magic lessons at the Water

Temple. I hadn't been given any moon skills in the first place, so I had no reason to take those classes either.

"That is not all—the nation of the moon on this continent, Laphroaig, fell long ago. It is treated as a cursed land."

"Laphroaig's the country that betrayed humanity and sided with the demons a thousand years ago, right?" I asked. That was what we'd learned in history lessons at the temple.

"The moon priestess at the time was known as the Witch of Calamity, and she pulled strings from behind the scenes, I believe."

"And that's why no one uses moon magic," I finished.

Water magic was the weakest type of magic.

Elemental magic had been forgotten.

Moon magic was loathed.

Incidentally, the strongest magic was sun-aligned.

"I'm glad my skill wasn't moon magic," I admitted. Although there *was* a certain longing I held toward darkness as an element.

"I have also heard tell that the moon priestess was taken down by the Highland Knights recently."

"Oh? That happened?"

I hadn't known that. Still…however evil the moon priestess had been in the past, the current one probably hadn't done anything wrong. It wasn't my problem, but I still felt bad for her.

"There have been more monsters of late as well, along with predictions of the revival of the Great Demon Lord, so there is much unrest. I presume that by subduing the moon priestess, they are trying to ease the minds of the populace."

"I reckon the one being subdued isn't too happy about it."

The wine gradually emptied as we spoke. It went down *real* easy, completely different from the cheap wines from the guild stalls.

"It would seem that there are many strong monsters within Labyrinthos as well. My esteemed Tackie, I *do* hope you will take care."

"The tough stuff is below the middle layer," I explained. "We're going to be taking things easy up top, so we'll be fine."

"You are always one to feign aiming for safety before doing the most ludicrous of things, so I am rather worried."

"I am?"

"You can hardly call facing that giant in single combat a sane action."

"Well, it all worked out in the end."

"Please," implored Fujiyan, "restrain yourself from such actions within Labyrinthos."

"All right already," I waved him off, gulping down the remnants of my wine.

Whew, I'm a bit tipsy. Wine's stronger than ale, right?

"By the way," I started, while pouring a second glass. This *was* something I'd been curious about. "How are things with Nina and Chris?"

“Guhpff!” Fujiyan sputtered, spraying wine as he did. *Oh, that sure hit home for once.*

“Nina’s always so easygoing, but she seemed fiercer with Chris around,” I continued, grinning and verbally poking at my buddy. “I’ve only met Chris once, so I don’t know much about her, but she sure seemed rather infatuated with you.”

“Well…I do feel some affection toward the two of them…” Fujiyan admitted with a slight amount of embarrassment.

How manly! So he’ll admit it straight off?

“I cannot pretend to be ignorant with my mind reading,” he mused, staring off into the distance as he drained his own glass.

“Right, skills that are too powerful are a pain as well.” Being able to read minds meant that he couldn’t remain unaffected and aloof. “So, which do you fancy?”

“You are awfully probing today…” Fujiyan griped. “Both of them are my precious friends. And of yourself, my esteemed Tackie? How are things with Miss Lucy?”

“What do you mean?”

Lucy? She was a precious comrade. She did set my heart pounding sometimes though. She just had so much on show…

“Hmm, well my skill means I can understand your feelings. How dull.”

“Poor you.”

The wine’s getting a bit warm.

Water Magic: Freeze. My spell cooled the wine down. Yup, it’s better like this.

“How convenient,” Fujiyan commented.

“Want me to get yours?”

“No, I prefer it at room temperature, personally.”

“Fair enough.”

We stopped talking and silence fell between us.

Nights in this world were quiet. The only noises that broke the silence were the sounds of the beasts in the forest beneath us.

The only other noise was the warm breeze making the sails flap. I gazed vacantly down into my wine glass, peering at the moon reflected in its depths.

After a while, Fujiyan spoke up. “My esteemed Tackie, I believe you had a good relationship with Aya Sasaki.”

“What?”

That was a name I hadn’t heard in a long time. Aya Sasaki, or Sasa.

She was one of the few friends I had in my class. My *late* friend, now.

I’d had feelings for her…maybe? She was the only one who’d come over and hung out at my house in junior high. I *do* think I saw her as a girl though.

“Forget it…it is nothing,” Fujiyan insisted. “My apologies.”

“It would’ve been great to sit and drink with her like this,” I admitted. That could never happen though.

When we used to play games together, Sasa and I would talk about how she wanted to go off somewhere. I don’t think we’d have ever considered a different world though.

“We…have come a long way,” Fujiyan said simply.

“Yeah…we have.”

In the end, we drank the night away, even opening a second bottle.

◇

“We’re here’h!” Nina announced, waking me up as the morning sunlight streamed through the windows.

My head hurt... I stayed up too late last night. Though, it *was* the first time in a long while that we’d enjoyed ourselves like that.

I made my way out, staggering because of the hangover.

Argh, the sun’s so bright...

Lucy was already waiting outside, wearing casual loungewear.

“Makoto, look, look!” she cried, pointing off into the distance. My eyes followed her finger.

“I can’t see anything but trees and mountains.” The view from the ship was completely blanketed in green.

“Look, that way,” she insisted.

I used *Clairvoyance* to squint in the direction she’d indicated.

Right, that does look like a town. Lucy’s as sharp-sighted as ever.

“That is the Labyrinth Town,” Fujiyan told us. “Is it the first time you’re both seeing it?”

“It is. So, it’s a town where everyone’s an adventurer?” Lucy asked.

“Not quite. It’s a town of people involved with adventuring. As the numbers of parties challenging Labyrinthos increased, people looking to sell items and lodging to adventurers gathered in the area, alongside clerics from the temples for healing. The adventurer’s guild set up a branch office here to administer it all.”

“It’s the biggest adventurer’s guild in Roses’h.”

Labyrinthos could almost be called a gateway to success for the people on this continent. Therefore, an adventurer’s town had naturally sprung up by its entrance.

“Let us stop around here,” Fujiyan decided. “If we suddenly float above the town, we might be mistaken for a monster.”

“Got it, let’s get off here then,” I agreed.

We disembarked just within viewing distance of the town’s entrance. It had a simple gate and was lacking stone walls like the ones surrounding Macallan.

Anyone could see that it was a recently-established town.

“I think we should go check in at the guild,” I said.

“Right, I want to get all the information we can,” Lucy added.

“I see. Personally, I have a business deal scheduled, so I shall not be accompanying you.”

“I’ll guard the boss’h.”

Those two must have some trade deals to close or something.

“My esteemed Tackie, let us meet at the Hero’s Tavern this evening. It is the largest tavern within the town, so you should be able to locate it quickly.”

“Got it,” I answered with a wave. “See you later.”

Right, off we go!

“Wow, those clothes are so cute!” Lucy exclaimed as she headed over to the stalls and started perusing the products.

“Come on, we need to find the guild first.”

“Aww, let’s sightsee a bit first.” Lucy had gone full-on tourist.

What to do...? I wanted to get on with things, but refusing a shopping date with a girl seemed kinda inflexible.

Oh, good lad. My goddess had suddenly spoken up in my mind. Well, if she’s praising me for my choice, it must be the right option.

Are you sad that Fujiyan’s so popular with Nina and Chris?

Y’know, reading people’s minds all the time isn’t a good look.

Well, I am a goddess.

Damn it, fine! We’re in another world, so I at least want a girlfriend!

Why don’t you just confess to Lucy?

No way, Goddess. I need more affection points first.

I...I see...

Well, that response got her exasperated. It’s in my nature though—I’m always one to stock up on everything and anything before I challenge the boss.

Lucy and I flitted around, shopping for a while, before heading to the guild. It was right in the middle of town, so we found it pretty quickly.

The rest of the buildings were fairly simple, so the huge guildhall stuck out a fair bit.

In a word, it was like a fort.

As we passed through the massive entrance into the building, Lucy yelled out, “So many people!”

“Looks like they’re doing well for themselves.”

The space was filled with adventurers. They were particularly crammed around the counter that assessed slain monsters. I guess you could bring a lot of kills back to the guild because it was so close to the dungeon.

We headed over to the receptionist.

“Umm, so that’s Makoto Takatsuki and Lucy J. Walker, a party of two, both iron rank...”

The receptionist fluidly wrote down our information. She was pretty, but not very friendly. Also, she seemed rather tired. I guess because she was busy? Yeah, must be.

After all, there were way more adventurers here than in Macallan.

"Okay, you're registered with the Labyrinth Town guild now. You don't need to accept quests, so feel free to delve into Labyrinthos as you please. And if you kill any monsters, you can exchange them here at the guild." Once we were finished registering, she asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"I'm good. Lucy?"

"Nope! Let's go, Makoto!"

Lucy was pretty fired up. Honestly, so was I. There were adventurers everywhere you looked.

I saw shops that sold weapons, armor, and items. There were also ones that sold the hearty meals adventurers preferred. I also spied lots of alcoholic drinks on sale that I'd never seen before.

Adventurers were walking around and chatting as they ate and drank.

I'd thought that the guildhall in Macallan was pretty bustling, but this was on another level.

It was a festival, or at least felt like one.

Though, with that said…

"Let's find somewhere to sleep for the night first," I suggested.

"Aww, we can do that later. Let's go look at the dungeon first!"

"Come on, we need a pla—"

As we chatted, someone interrupted us.

"Yo, girl, that's a hot outfit."

"If you're heading for the dungeon, you should go with us, not this brat."

"How 'bout an evenin' together? I'll take good care o' ya."

The sleazy comments were coming from behind us. We turned to see a bunch of rough-looking adventurers leering our way. I'd completely forgotten because we now spent so much time together, but Lucy was good-looking and her outfit showed a lot of skin, so she really drew the eye.

Guess they were going to threaten us.

"Come on, answer, elf girl."

"You're wearing such a sexy outfit."

"We'll party up with the girl. Kiddo, you head off home."

There were over ten thousand adventurers in this town, so of course, there'd be some who were less than pleasant.

Lucas had told us that there would be experienced adventurers who went after young parties like ours. Macallan's adventurers were all pretty nice, now that I thought about it. They'd even given us strange nicknames.

With that said, though, the best way to deal with this kind of thing was to avoid showing weakness.

I was an iron rank adventurer, so I could stand to be a bit bolder.

I decided to say something. Setting *Calm Mind* to 99%, I heaved a deep sigh.

However, Lucy beat me to it.

"You what?! We took down a griffin in Macallan! You're the small fries. Clear off, go on, shoo!"

She always *was* a firecracker.

"C-Come on, Lucy."

Her words might've been a bit *too* provocative though.

The leader-looking guy reacted just like I'd expected. His expression turned harsher and he even drew his sword. *So you're short-tempered too!*

"Who you calling small fry?"

"You two took out a *griffin*? Pick a better lie."

"You cheeky brats. I guess we'll need to teach you a lesson."

The leering scumbags circled us and the room started to get noisier. Sooner or later, the guild staff would probably put a stop to things.

I kinda feel like no one's gonna take us seriously then, hmm...

The adventurer didn't seem stupid enough to actually come swinging at us out of nowhere. He probably just didn't want to back down after a cheeky adventurer had badmouthed him.

I took a step forward and put myself in front of Lucy to protect her. The leader's blade shone in front of me.

Drawing your weapon's just uncalled for...

I was just slightly mad, and I spoke to him almost conversationally. "Well, that looks like a pretty decent sword."

"Ha! Obviously. This was smithed by the best in Highla—"

As he boasted, I moved.

Shing went my dagger as I drew and swung it.

I knew just how sharp my dagger was since I'd cut off the giant's finger with it. The scumbag's sword stood no chance—I sliced right through it like butter.

The tip of his blade fell to the ground with a clatter.

Man, this dagger's seriously broken. Dagger of the Goddess OP!

"Ahhhhhh! M-My mythril swoooooord!" he screamed out

Gah, it was mythril?

I really had done him wrong. Mythril weapons were stupidly expensive.

Well, he'd done us wrong first. I'd just needed to assert dominance.

"I suppose it was poor quality after all. I'm shocked that this little dagger could cut through it," I said, looking down on him as much as possible.

"Y-You little..."

"You were the ones who started this. We're Lucas Dalmore's pupils. Picking a fight with us is picking a fight with him."

"Guh, the dragonslayer...?"

"They're with Lucas...?"

Well, the pupil bit was a lie. Lucas was a swordsman, and I was an apprentice mage. But Lucas's name *was* pretty well-known around Labyrinthos.

He'd advised us to name-drop him if we ever got caught up with any of the worse examples of adventurers.

"Tch, come on, you guys."

“Fuckers.”

“We’ll remember this.”

And with that, they left. Wow, Lucas really is well-known here.

“Phew, that was nerve-racking…”

“You’re Lucas’s pupil?” Lucy asked.

Come on, Lucy, why did *you* buy it too?

“I’ll explain later. Let’s go.”

“Wha? Hey! Quit pulling!”

And so, Lucy and I left the guildhall.

“Hmm, I didn’t realize he was that famous,” Lucy marveled.

“The name ‘Lucas the Dragonslayer’ used to be known by every adventurer,” I told her.

“Well, he *has* taken a lot of dragon subjugations.”

I remembered listening to a lot of his tales around the stalls of Macallan.

“How about a quick dungeon dive then?” I asked. “Emphasis on *quick*.”

“Yeah! I’m so excited!”

We made our way to the entrance of the dungeon in the center of town.

Guild personnel were assigned to count people who went through the entrance to Labyrinthos. Adventurers went missing every day in there, so the guild checked people in and out. It was almost like a theme park.

We told the attendee our names and that we’d be back within the day. If we didn’t return by tomorrow, we’d be added to the list of missing people that the adventurer’s guild kept.

Yeah, not so much a theme park—our lives were on the line.

“Hey, Makoto, where shall we go?”

“Hmmm, let’s see.”

I pondered as I checked the dungeon map (of the top layer) that the guild had sold me. The upper layer had been essentially explored out, so pretty much everywhere was already mapped.

Suddenly, my *RPG Player* skill screen popped up.

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Where will you go?
Left: Green Cavern
▶Middle: Water Cavern
Right: Fire Cavern
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“Huh, it’s been a while,” I muttered.

“Did you say something?” Lucy asked.

“Nope, nothing. Let’s head for the water cavern.”

“Figures… Of course you’d choose that one.”

The entrance to the vast dungeon (caves) was split into three routes, and I’d picked the one most suited to me. As the cavern’s name implied, small waterways and streams of water flowed alongside the path.

Even more water oozed from the walls in the cave, therefore, it was the water cavern.

"The constant flowing water means that the dungeon walls erode, so they're weak to strong impact. We won't be able to use your Meteo spell."

"What?! Really?"

"Weren't you listening to Mary?"

"Urk..." Lucy said, looking away.

I sighed. "The monsters up here are weak, so we should be fine."

"There are minotaurs too, though. They're high danger level, right?"

"Minotaurs just guard the stairs to the lower levels. They're supposed to test adventurers heading down."

"Hmm, then we just need to not go too far in! Got it."

Once we'd agreed on that, Lucy and I started our exploration. There were dozens of puddles on the ground, and our feet splashed into them as we walked.

"Hey, heading in?" one party asked us as we passed by.

"Hi, are you heading back?"

We saw other parties as well. The dungeon really was doing well for itself; there were so many adventurers.

I'd even heard rumors that some particularly hardy merchants ran shops within the dungeon itself. Their prices were apparently ten times those on the surface.

"Monsters have been more active lately," one of the adventurers told us. "Be careful."

"A sign of the Great Demon Lord resurrecting?" I asked.

"Don't say that. See you."

"Right, thanks for the warning."

Our thanks given, we all separated.

Lucy and I explored the upper layer like that for a while.

"Hup," I said.

I'd sneaked around the back of a kobold that was staggering through the dungeon. I threw out mist to hinder visibility, used *Stealth* to silence myself, and then finally used the Dagger of the Goddess to cut it down.

"I'm done, Lucy."

"This isn't any different to hunting goblins," she pouted.

The only monsters we'd come across in the dungeon so far were weaklings like kobolds and goblins.

"It's not like we'll need your magic to take care of these."

"You can say that again..."

It was a bit of a letdown, I had to admit. The dungeon was big though, and there were many different types of monsters... But it nonetheless felt fairly similar to the area around the Forest of Fiends.

We relaxed, just a little, as we trudged along.

But suddenly, we heard screams coming from further into the cave.

“Gyaaahhh!!!”

“Someone, help!”

“Lucy!”

“Let’s go!”

“Hold on a second,” I said, stopping her. We couldn’t afford to rush here. “It might be better to wait.”

“We’re not going to help?”

“I checked with *Scout*, and they’re gonna flee in this direction regardless. Start casting. We need a small *Stone Shot*.”

“Got it!”

Sense Danger pinged in my head.

That sound means it’s a dangerous monster.

On this floor, there should only be weak monsters. However, there was a single type that was more dangerous.

A monstrous figure suddenly appeared from the depths.

“Here it is.”

“A minotaur!” Lucy exclaimed tensely.

They were the rulers of this floor. The beast had an ax in each hand.

Irritating.

“I thought you said they were only in the depths?!”

“It must have strayed. Or maybe it’s because of the increased monster activity.”

I readied my dagger. The minotaur was around five meters tall, roughly equal to the big ogres we’d fought. Its axes gleamed with blood.

I wonder if the screamer got away…

“M-Makoto. C-Can we deal with it?” Lucy asked, sounding slightly afraid.

“Well, we’ve got the chance, so let’s try out some stronger elemental magic.”

I shifted my dagger and peered around the area.

My *RPG Player*’s perspective displayed countless blue lights around us.

Yup, plenty of them.

“#@||?&!^*}{**#%~$&%+, <Hello, elementals,>” I called.

I’d barely even interacted with the elementals in this area, so I needed to give them a proper greeting.

“#@||?&!^*}{**#%~$&%+? <How about we play?>”

Suddenly, I could feel their interest focusing on me. *Great, looking good.*

“H-Hey! It’s already here! *Stone Shot*!” Lucy yelled out. She was panicking and quickly fired off her magic.

The stone was launched from her staff, and it headed for the minotaur. It rocketed toward the monster with speed and struck before shattering on impact.

Unfortunately, *Stone Shot* just wasn’t all that effective.

“N-No way,” Lucy muttered. It *was* a far smaller rock than her usual Meteo attack. She’d held back too much.

“Grraaaah!” The minotaur roared in anger, raising its axes and leaping forward.

If I’d moved a few seconds later, they would’ve split my head in two.

“Hey! Makoto!” Lucy cried out tearily.

I should be ready—there were plenty of water elementals here!

Water Magic: Flood Gaol.

“Gwoh?”

Water billowed up from beneath us, centered under my feet. It filled the passage in an instant, engulfing the minotaur, me, and also Lucy in the water.

“Mmph! Mmmph!”

Ah, damn it. Lucy can’t breathe underwater.

I hurriedly linked hands with her. That way, my magic should work on both of us.

“Gwoh! Gwuf! Gah!”

The minotaur was trying to escape from the water. Not that it could.

Water Magic: Flow.

“’Round you go,” I commented, twirling my finger. The minotaur began to spin in a vortex as if it were in a washing machine.

The huge bull monster soon passed out and fell silent.

I let the summoned water flow away and thanked the elemental spirits.

Lucy was heaving for breath. Water breathing or not, suddenly being underwater must have been a shock.

“My bad,” I apologized. “You okay?”

“Y-Yeah…I’m fine. That was incredible! Was that high rank magic?”

“Yeah, I’m glad it worked.”

“What’s with that?! You can use high rank spells now?”

“Nope,” I clarified, “the water elementals helped me. They have infinite mana, so they just shared some with me. Controlling the finer details is the issue.”

That’s why Lucy and I had gotten caught up in the spell too.

“What shall we do with him, then?” I asked, looking down at the minotaur. We’d killed it, after all.

“We can’t exactly take it with us.”

“It’s times like this when I wish we had an item for storing things.”

I really hated that Fujiyan and his *Storage* skill weren’t here.

“Heyyy! You killed it!”

“Y-You saved us…”

“Thank you, thank you!”

Several battered adventurers appeared. They must have been the source of the scream.

Apparently, the minotaur had spotted Lucy while chasing them and had switched targets. Maybe her red coloration had made it angry.

“Monsters sure love you, Lucy.”

“That’s not something I want to hear…”

“Say, why don’t we help you carry it?” offered one of the adventurers.

“Oh! That’d be great,” I agreed.

We headed back out of the cavern, and the group told us more about Labyrinthos.

“So you’ve been here for half a year?” I asked.

“Yeah, we hit iron rank so we’ve been training up here,” said one party member.

“The monsters have been more active lately though,” another added.

“Yeah, the situation’s changed.”

“I heard that a blight dragon appeared in the lower layer.”

“A blight dragon?” I asked.

“They’re also called blight monsters,” Lucy explained. “They’re evil creatures that allied with the Great Demon Lord a thousand years ago. A miasma surrounds blighted beasts, and they breathe curses. Even glimpsing one is said to cause mental corruption…”

“It’s got nothing to do with mid-ranked adventurers like us,” the party leader said. “So we don’t really know the details.”

“You’re both incredible, though. You took down that minotaur with just the two of you like it was nothing.”

“Are you silver ranks? Or maybe super-young gold ranks?”

“No way, we’re iron ranks as well,” I told them.

“Whew! You’ve got a bright future!”

We made it back to the exit during our cheery chat and then notified the guild staff at the entrance that we’d returned. We then handed over the monster. Apparently, we’d know the results of the guild’s assessment and would receive the money for the minotaur tomorrow.

After that, we spent a little while hanging around the guild.

“Hey, do you think it’s getting a bit noisier, Lucy?” I asked later.

“Maybe something happened.”

“It has,” said a guild worker. “The Highland army is here.”

“Oh, the Soleil Knights, right?” I asked.

“They must be here for the blight dragon.”

“Still, feels a bit strange for the military to be interfering in an adventurer town.”

“Also, we’re in Roses, so they’re a *foreign* army.”

All the adventurers were talking about it.

“Shall we take a look?” I asked Lucy.

“Yeah!”

We meandered our way toward the entrance to the town.

“So these are the Soleil Knights…”

An area of the forest near the gates had been cleared and turned into a garrison. There were multiple tents set up, along with tethered horses and wyverns.

While they were all called knights, the group was like a huge party with literal knights, warriors, archers, mages, priests, and other jobs besides.

At a glance, the most obvious difference was in their equipment.

They were all wearing plain clothes with a red pattern, and their armor was coordinated. Adventurers usually had a mishmash of equipment, so it was a blatant difference. Their armor was inscribed with the name *Althena*.

So this is the strongest army on the continent... They sure look it.

The people in town were interested as well, and the number of spectators was gradually increasing.

“Ahh! It’s the Hero of Light!”

“The reincarnation of the Savior... It’s an honor to meet him.”

“He’s so dashing...”

The female adventurers were all commenting.

“Wow! So that’s the Hero of Light! I’ve never seen him before!”

Even Lucy was getting excited.

I guess he’d be something like an idol in this world.

In front of me stood a classmate I’d parted ways with about a year and a half ago—Sakurai.

Another of my old classmates, Yokoyama, was next to him.

Huh? Wasn’t there another person with him before?

Sakurai and Yokoyama’s outfits were both finer and more expensive than everyone’s around them.

Well, guess you get the VIP treatment when you have OP skills.

It’s not like I’m jealous! I thought to myself. But surely, this wasn’t the meeting my goddess had meant?

“Hey, why’re we leaving?” Lucy asked. “You know him, right? Why not stay and chat?”

“We’re not close at all, and he’s probably forgotten me by now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

We left the group of Soleil Knights at a quick clip. I wasn’t lying about not being close with Sakurai, the Hero of Light, but my reasons for not speaking to him had less to do with that, and more to do with my avoidance of a person near him.

It was the Water Priestess, Sophia Eir Roses.

The girl that’d taken one look at me and decided I was worthless.

I wanted nothing to do with her.

Still, though, if Roses’s princess was showing up here, something pretty big must have been going on.

“Hey, hey, did you see?” Lucy asked cheerily. “There were some real bigwigs with them. Even a princess!”

“Yeah,” I replied with disinterest.

“You don’t seem all that into it... But she’s the first in line to the Highland throne, Noelle Althena Highland! She was practically shining!”

“What? Seriously, I didn’t see anyone like that...”

“What are you talking about?! She was super noticeable.”

Hmm, guess I was paying too much attention to the water priestess. I think I might remember seeing someone in a fancy dress next to her though. Didn’t expect two princesses to come out all this way.

“Well, whatever,” Lucy decided. “It’s got nothing to do with us, so let’s go meet up at the tavern!”

“Shouldn’t we go back to the guild first and gather info?”

“We can do that later! I’m hungry!”

“All right, all right, I get it.”

I wanted a drink too, so yeah, time to meet up with Fujiyan.

We soon found the Hero’s Tavern. Rather than a tavern, it was more like a massive beer garden. There were tables and chairs all over the place outside, so the whole thing looked a bit makeshift. Regardless, adventurers were nursing their drinks all around the tavern. There weren’t enough chairs, so some of them were just sitting on the floor.

That looks fun! I’m all fired up!

“Mister Takatsuki’h! Miss Lucy’h! This way’h!”

Nina was waving at us, her long ears swishing back and forth along with her hand.

“You two have a minotaur already under your belt, I hear! I expected nothing less,” Fujiyan said, greeting us.

The table he’d commandeered was already piled high with food.

“Gossip spreads fast, huh?” I asked. It had only been, what, a few hours since we’d slain it?

“Wow! That looks amazing!” Lucy exclaimed before biting into a large serving of bacon and bread.

I ordered an ale and sat down. “What have you been doing then, Fujiyan?”

“I have been embroiled in negotiations to arrange periodic flights with the guild.”

“Whew, it’s going well then?”

“But of course. I have plans to connect, by air, both Macallan and Labyrinthos, and also Roses’s and Highland’s capitals.”

“Macallan sticks out a bit there,” Lucy commented.

She was right. It was like connecting Osaka, Tokyo, and Tottori, I guess?

“Lady Christina insisted.”

Well, that plan made more sense now—the Macallan lord’s daughter wanted it.

“You can’t go against your sponsor, I s’pose.” Sounded tough to me.

“Incidentally, Sir Sakurai seems to also be within the town.” Fujiyan told me this around a mouthful of meat as he chewed from the bone.

“We saw him earlier. He was with the Soleil Knights.”

“Oooh! The Hero of Light?! Both you and the boss know him, right’h?!”

Even Nina's eyes were sparkling. Why was everyone so taken with heroes?

"My esteemed Tackie. While the hero skill is indeed popular, Sir Sakurai's fame comes from his position as the Hero of Light."

"Is that different from any other hero?" I asked, taking a sip from my slightly lukewarm ale.

"Seriously, Makoto?" Lucy asked.

"You don't have enough worldly knowledge'h," added Nina.

Huh? I'm the odd one out here?

"Holders of the hero skill are cared for deeply by their respective countries. Roses has the Hero of Ice and Snow, Great Keith has the Hero of Incandescence, and Springrogue has the Hero of Swaying Trees."

"There are only a few in each country blessed with a hero skill, so they get the best treatment possible."

"Hmm, wish I was one of them." *Yup, totally unfair.*

"But, there has only ever been one Hero of Light in history."

"What? Just the one?"

That...sounded about right? I did seem to remember it was famous. After all, even I knew about that skill.

"Abel the Savior. It's a skill only he has ever had."

"Then, a year ago, the second person with the skill appeared'h."

"Makoto, no one has possessed the skill since Abel the Savior defeated the Great Demon Lord a thousand years ago."

"Oh...I see."

Getting a legendary skill that no one's had in the last millennium... Yeah, that'd definitely draw attention. Plus, it was a skill unique to the savior of the world.

"When we first arrived, Roses claimed that the Hero of Light was under their dominion," Fujiyan explained. "After all, the Water Temple was the place that sheltered us otherworlders. But then, Highland put pressure on Roses so they could claim him for their nation."

"Oh, so that's what went on behind the scenes." I'd never known. Sakurai's popular in this world *and* the last! "I'm impressed that you know so much."

"I learned everything after I became a merchant. There is more to it as well. Apparently, Roses was given the first right of refusal for the rest of the otherworlders in exchange for giving up the hero of the sun."

And the one responsible for that would be...the water priestess, Sophia. She'd definitely had a gleam in her eyes while she'd been evaluating us. Just remembering it got me mad.

"The Hero of Lightning is also of Highland, but the power of that position seems to be weakening."

"Also," Nina added, "the Hero of Light is Princess Noelle's fiancé'h."

"Wait, for real?" I hadn't known that Sakurai'd gotten tangled up in that stuff.

“I’ve also heard rumors of his relationship with the water priestess.”

“You heard what?” *The hell?* Two countries’ princesses were after him? Was *that* why they were both here?

“Hmph, sounds like he’s the protagonist.” I downed my second ale.

“Oh, all of it is far from pleasant,” Fujiyan stated with a rueful smile.

“The Highland princes want his head. At least, that’s what the rumors say’h.”

“Apparently, Princess Noelle became the heir when she got engaged to the Hero of Light.”

“But before that, her brother had been the next in line to the throne.”

“Oh, right. Figures there’d be a bunch of backroom stuff with succession in big countries.”

“Our classmates Yokoyama and Kawamoto seem to have their own hardships as well,” Fujiyan added.

Those were the girls that used to hover around Sakurai. Must be hard to stand out when compared to a princess.

“There are even mutterings that this clamor with the blight dragon is some plot concocted by the faction against Sakurai.”

“Where’d you hear that?” Lucy asked.

Fujiyan sure had a vast information network. We spent the rest of our time chatting: about how we’d fought the minotaur, about Nina’s past experience of going a layer down in Labyrinthos, about how the Hero’s Tavern bought alcohol in bulk from the Fujiwara Trading Company.

We got swept up in the general mood and drank quite a bit.

And so, we’d spent a while enjoying ourselves. I thought I might’ve drunk a bit *too* much, so I was now sipping at some water.

“Is this seat free?” A man appeared, and his voice was smooth like a spring breeze.

“What?” Lucy and Nina both managed.

“Well now, this is a surprise,” Fujiyan said with wide eyes.

“Well speak of the devil…” I muttered.

“It’s been a while, Takatsuki, Fujiwara.”

The man who’d just appeared was the center of the continent’s attention —Ryousuke Sakurai, the Hero of Light.

Without waiting for an answer, he sat down in the empty chair.

He was now wearing a different, more understated set of clothes than before. They didn’t have a single wrinkle though, and so he stuck out amongst the dirty adventurers in the tavern.

“Th-The Hero of Li—mph.” Lucy had been about to yell out, so I hurriedly put my hand over her mouth.

“I-It’s nice to meet you’h… It is an honor’h.” Even Nina was oddly nervous as she spoke.

“I am surprised you knew that we were here,” Fujiyan said, voicing what was on both of our minds.

“I saw a report on how the proprietor of the Fujiwara Firm was a large supplier of ours.”

“Fujiyan, you went that far?” I asked.

“It was just a sweetener. The Soleil Knights are the biggest army on the continent, so being in their good graces does the opposite of harm.”

Should you really be laughing and talking about “sweeteners” like that…? Are we actually even the same age?

“Quite a few of us are fans of the stronger Macallan drinks, so we’re grateful for it,” Sakurai told Fujiyan with a pleasant smile. “But I didn’t think you’d be here too, Takatsuki! It was worth taking the time out.”

“Y-Yeah, it’s been a while. You seem well.”

Sakurai smacked me on the back like some American, and I cursed our reunion. No matter what he did, he looked so cool. Yeah, he hadn’t changed at all, the lady-killer.

“We heard you were here to take down the blight dragon?”

“Yeah, that’s right. We’re the newbies in the Soleil Knights, so we get all the annoying jobs.” The Hero of Light’s smile was slightly awkward.

“Shouldn’t be a problem for you though, right?” I teased lightly.

“No way! I only just got here after all,” said Sakurai. “Actually! If you’ve got the info, would you mind guiding us?”

“Ah! We’d be ha—mph!” Lucy was about to make a rash decision, so I covered her mouth again.

“We only just got here ourselves, so I don’t think we’d be much help.”

“Ah, that’s a shame.”

I doubted that he really wanted us to guide him, to be honest.

He told us a little about his hardships as the hero. Fifteen minutes passed as Fujiyan and Nina kept the conversation going with appropriate responses and praise.

Eventually, Sakurai said, “Well, I’ve got some plans,” and just let us be.

What’d he even turn up for? He hadn’t ordered a single drink, so maybe he’d just wanted a chat?

“Ahhh, I’m shaking’h,” Nina said. She was actually trembling slightly from nerves.

“‘He might not remember me’ my foot! You were super close!” Lucy exclaimed.

“Fujiyan, you weren’t friends with him, right?”

“Not in the slightest… Were you close with him?”

“Like hell I was.” We’d barely ever spoken in class.

“Makoto! Why’d you refuse?!” Lucy asked. “It was such a good chance!”

“Are you an idiot? They’re here to exterminate the dragon on the lower level. We can’t guide them there. Don’t take it so seriously.”

“Sir Sakurai certainly seemed serious,” Fujiyan commented.

“That’s fairly persuasive coming from you, Boss’h.” Nina must know about his mind-reading skill.

So Sakurai *was* serious then? What was he thinking…?

“Well, I might not get what’s going on, but let’s just have a drink,” I decided. I bit into some fries, even though they were already cold.

“Why are you so calm…?”

Lucy was aghast at my behavior, but I’d seen him every day when we were classmates, so of course, I wouldn’t get as excited as her.

“Ack, damn it,” I said, changing the subject. “We didn’t find somewhere to stay.”

“Worry not, my friend. I have already arranged accommodation for the two of you.”

“Thanks for that, as ever.”

Seriously, Fujiyan was a real help. He’d reserved us rooms in an inn for merchants. The plush beds were stuffed with feather down, just like they would’ve been in my old world. They were so soft!

◇

Fujiyan apparently had some meeting the next day, so he vanished off someplace with Nina.

Lucy and I continued our own activities from yesterday, heading deeper into Labyrinthos, and starting our second day of exploration.

“What route are we taking today?” Lucy asked.

“The water cavern.”

“Aw, again?”

“Calm down, take a look at this.”

I showed her the map of the upper level.

“The Great Waterfalls of Labyrinthos?”

“I heard it’s one of the best sights in this place.”

“Oh… Apparently, it’s popular with couples, and the guild takes tours out to it…” Lucy said. “Is this really a dungeon?”

I had to agree; it definitely felt more like a tourist spot.

“Because of all the monsters recently, there have been fewer tours as well,” I told her.

“Hmmm, couples…” Lucy murmured.

“You all right there?”

“Huh? Ah, it’s nothing! If you *have* to go, then that’s fine!”

She agreed, and the two of us set off down that path to the water cavern again. It was the second time we’d gone, so it was fairly familiar. We couldn’t discount the chance of another minotaur wandering into the place though, so we had to keep our guards up.

While the dungeon was dim as a whole, there were lighted stones positioned here and there, and the cavern itself seemed to be lit up in blue. The deeper we went, the bluer the light grew, like we were entering some phantasmal space.

Dungeons are so cool.

The monsters we came across were all weak, so we could take our time exploring. There weren’t many other adventurers on the same path as us,

maybe because of the minotaur that'd been wandering the cavern yesterday. We gradually progressed but made sure to keep an eye out. We'd gone a fair bit into the cavern when I noticed...

Something was wrong.

Something was following us...but not a monster.

Something was keeping pace with us.

That means...

"Lucy," I whispered. "We're being followed."

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Explores Labyrinthos

“We’re being followed,” I told Lucy quietly.

“What?” she asked, turning around. “You hadn’t noticed?”

“What?”

No, really, what?

“Someone’s been following us since before we entered the dungeon.”

Seriously?!

“Tell me that sooner next time!”

“I thought you’d already seen them… I’m sorry,” she apologized, hunching over.

“Ah, well. Keeping a lookout is my job,” I conceded. “Still, I’m glad you noticed.”

“They’ve been glaring at us, and they said something about payback for the sword, so they’re probably the guys we fought with back in the guild. To follow us this far… They must be pretty shady.”

C-Come on! This is pretty bad, isn’t it? They’ve been using the Stealth skill to follow us.

They must hate us quite a bit and are probably planning something fairly bad. My *Scout* skill revealed that ten of them were behind us.

I didn’t know how strong they were, but I could only hope that they were iron rank or lower. If any of them were gold or silver rank, we’d be done for. That was on par with Nina’s level, and we couldn’t beat that.

“This is a bit of an overreaction to breaking a mythril sword, isn’t it?” asked Lucy.

“N-Not really…” I’d actually asked Fujiyan last night how much a mythril sword would cost. Apparently, you couldn’t get one for under five million gald.

That was the average yearly income of an iron rank adventurer.

I guess I’d also vow revenge against someone who broke something I’d spent a whole year’s wages on.

“Let’s just get out of here,” I decided after a while. “*Water Magic: Fog*.”

Dense mist filled the entire cavern, and I even activated *Stealth* before I linked my hand with Lucy’s.

All we had to do then was let them pass by us. There were a lot of different paths through Labyrinthos, and it would be sneakiest to slip away behind them. Taking away their visibility and using *Stealth* should let us shake them.

“Damn, they saw us!” one of our stalkers exclaimed.

“Find them! They can’t have gone far.”

“Don’t get separated, there are monsters around.”

The thumping footsteps gradually faded into the distance.

“They’re gone,” Lucy said. With her ears, we could be sure of that, and my *Scout* skill also wasn’t finding anything.

I let out a deep sigh. “Sorry, Lucy.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“It’s because of my mistake.” I should never have cut his sword in the guild. All I’d wanted to do was make sure that we weren’t looked down upon, but I’d ended up putting my party at risk.

“What do you mean? It’s not your fault. Actually, it’s theirs, for being so easily wound up,” she said with a bright smile.

I was glad that Lucy was my friend. Although, I wouldn’t say that their anger had been “easily” triggered; I’d broken a mythril sword after all.

“What shall we do now?” she asked.

“Let’s go see the waterfalls like we planned. As for that lot… Let’s think about that later.” Honestly, I had a headache. “We can just ignore them, right?”

“I doubt that’ll work.”

I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, so I decided I’d talk it over with Fujiyan once Lucy and I got back. In the meantime, we kept our attention on our surroundings as we continued to explore the dungeon.

Labyrinthos was the largest dungeon on the continent, and it had many places to see. Particularly famous among them were the Great Waterfalls, which linked the upper and middle layers.

“Wow… It’s incredible,” Lucy murmured.

“It’s like Niagara…” was my own muttered comment. I couldn’t help but compare it to the famous waterfalls of my old world. By my side, Lucy was just as captivated.

There seemed to be a huge subterranean lake at the foot of the cliffs. It appeared out of nowhere, and I could see it situated in the depths from our position on the upper layer.

The circumference of said lake was ringed by massive waterfalls.

It was impossible to see its entirety. Above the lake, there must have been a crack to the outside world—a shaft of sunlight cut down through the air and gleamed on the water’s surface. Altogether, it was a mystical scene.

I also noticed that huge birds were flying through that sunlight.

“What’s Niagara, by the way?” Lucy asked.

“It’s a tourist spot in my old world. They’re famous waterfalls.”

“Hmm. The bottom of the cliffs is the middle layer, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll be in trouble if we fall, so watch your step.”

According to the map, the cliffs would be around two hundred meters tall, using units of measure from my original world.

The lake at the bottom was located in the middle layer… Which meant that, at the center of this beautiful tableau, there were strong monsters.

At that moment, Lucy suddenly turned around, and my *Scout* skill reacted.

“Hey, they’re actually here.”

“I told you so. Rookies always turn up here.”

“Hey there, Macallan adventurers. We owe you one.”

The aggressive adventurers from yesterday had appeared, along with a bunch of others that seemed to be their allies.

I should have noticed so many people... I thought with a quiet rebuke to myself.

“So they’ve got a *Stealth* skill.”

“Sorry, Makoto, I didn’t notice,” Lucy apologized.

“Nor did I.”

Well, this was a bit of a sticky situation; I’d underestimated their tenacity. In the end, it was my fault.

One of them leered at us. “Don’t scar the elf. She’ll fetch a good price. Redheads are rare.”

“How good?”

“That’s what I’m gonna check, along with every inch of her body.”

So they were slavers.

“Come on, I’m sorry for breaking your sword. Let us off?” I doubted that would work, but I still tried it.

“You what? Nah, you’re dying down here. I doubt you’ve got much worth looting, but that dagger’ll sell well. That works for us.”

Yup, they weren’t interested in my offer.

“Newbie hunters then?”

Lucas had warned us about them.

“Cut them off!” The leader with the (broken) mythril sword ordered his men, and the others encircled us, putting our backs to the cliff.

We had the drop behind us, and nowhere else to run.

“M-Makoto...” Lucy whimpered, clutching my sleeve.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder to calm her down.

“Now then...” I murmured.

What should we do? While I was racking my brain for a maneuver or plan to use...I was assaulted with a crippling headache.

It soon abated, but a noise, almost a shrill whine, filled my head.

Was it... Detect Danger*?*

Detect Danger was a skill that notified me when I came into contact with low, mid, and high-level monsters. As they approached, I’d hear a noise in my head. The current pitch was something higher than high-level though.

Mary from the guild had once told me to be careful because some people could get headaches from the presence of monsters that were deemed “calamities.” That term referred to beasts that could not be fought alone because they were too strong, almost like a natural disaster. They were further categorized into village, town, country, and continent-level calamities.

For example, a village calamity monster could destroy an entire village... In other words, the strength of calamities was beyond comparison... even to high-level monsters. I tightened my grip on Lucy.

“Makoto...?”

“Ohh, you some kinda white knight protecting the girl? How brave.” The man spoke, but I didn’t really parse it.

Where?

Where was it?

Where was it coming from?

I refused to let my guard down, and instead, surveyed the area.

Then, *it* appeared.

The air itself shook from its bellow. Suddenly, a huge creature burst up from the ground, just between the shady adventurers and us.

“A dra...gon?” Lucy muttered.

None of the adventurers could react.

“Every dragon is a calamity, so if you see one, just run.” Lucas had once told us this at the guild stall.

Lucy and the others were all staring confusedly at it. The beast had craggy scales, almost like rock, and they were all a dark brown in color, except for a few splashes of green across its body, which looked like emeralds.

Is this...an earth dragon?

Its mouth looked big enough to swallow anything and was filled with fangs.

This thing was the pinnacle of monsters.

As I gazed upon it, the emotion I felt was...wonder.

“Wow...”

It was a dragon. A real dragon!

The shock I felt running through my body was even greater than the one I’d experienced when we’d first arrived in this world.

This was the king of monsters, the one that had captured the princess in the first RPG I’d ever played. I’d always wanted to see one. And right now, it was close enough that I could almost touch it.

This world is amazing...

I was probably distracted for a few seconds.

“Makoto! We need to run!” Lucy shouted.

In my head, I heard the goddess say, *Pull yourself together!*

Lucy’s scream and the goddess’s scolding overlapped, and they finally brought me back to my senses. The other adventurers had rallied themselves too, just enough to yell and run.

```
Will you challenge the dragon?
Yes
▶No
```

I couldn’t help but snark at the option *RPG Player* was giving me.

Don’t be stupid.

I held on tight to Lucy, and without hesitation, threw us off the cliff.

“Whaaaaaaaaaa?!”

With Lucy’s scream ringing in my ears, I let myself pass through the waterfall. In an instant, I was buffeted by violent currents.

Water Magic: Flow!

I calmly used magic to control the water, in order to mitigate the shock of the fall. Luckily, the lake was deep, so we didn’t hit the bottom. Then, we just carried on through the churning water.

Though the lake was dark, and I couldn’t see anything, my *Scout* skill revealed the monsters around us.

There are so many… Well, this is the middle layer.

Just a rough glance around using my skill had revealed quite a few.

First things first, we need to get out of this lake.

Lucy was mumbling something in my arms, but I ignored her for now and swam for the bank.

Once we’d gotten onto dry land, we hid behind a big rock, and I used *Stealth* to make sure that the monsters wouldn’t notice us. Now that we were relatively safe, Lucy was steaming mad.

“What’s the big idea?! You didn’t say anything about jumping off!”

“Well, if I had, our stalkers would’ve known too, right?” I reasoned. “Actually, I wonder if they’re okay…”

“Why are you worrying about people who were going to kill you? More importantly, what was a *dragon* doing there?”

“Lucas said that they were on the lower layer and that we weren’t supposed to go there…”

“So it came to us on the top layer…that’s not fair.”

“Nope. Iron ranks don’t stand a chance against it.”

We sighed.

“What do we do now?”

“Get back to the top, right?” Lucy asked.

“Well, yeah, but we don’t know where to go.”

“What? Can’t we just use your magic to go back up the waterfall?”

“I’m not going to be climbing waterfalls any time soon,” I stated. Even when we were just falling into it, I could barely keep us uninjured.

“Are we in trouble?” she asked.

“Well, we’re not in the best situation. Let’s just dry off first.”

I used *Evaporate* on both of our clothes. If we let the dampness chill us, then we’d be slower, and we’d lose our stamina. We did have two days of provisions on hand, but we hadn’t been intending to go on a full expedition, so those were the extent of our supplies.

“Let’s search for a way back up,” I suggested.

“It’s all waterfalls though.”

“There are breaks in the water here and there, so we can take a look around and avoid the monsters.”

We explored around the lake. However, no matter where we looked, there were only cliffs and waterfalls to be found. We spent about half a day searching like that. It was depressing work, but at least there was something to distract us from it.

“It really is a beautiful sight,” I said. The waterfalls were probably the main reason for that.

“Um,” Lucy looked at me oddly. “I thought the same until that dragon appeared, but I think you look at things a bit oddly.”

“Do I?”

“You do! You were fascinated by the dragon, you weirdo. Do you just love danger?”

Hmm, well, I’d try to deny that…but I wasn’t sure that I could.

“You’re always looking around the dungeon like you’re sightseeing too,” Lucy pointed out. “You don’t have a good enough sense of danger.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

“I hope you will.”

Our search continued alongside our idle chatter. However, there was no sign of a path back toward the surface. We were now pretty tired and had decided to take a longer break.

That…was when we met her.

“U-Um… Are you adventurers?” an unfamiliar girl asked us.

We were in the middle of Labyrinthos, next to a lake, and the both of us had been taking turns keeping watch. We’d just decided to move on when she appeared.

“Oh?” Lucy spoke.

I just stared steadily at the unfamiliar woman.

The girl was young, with pale skin and unkempt hair. She had refined features though. Her clothes were tattered, falling apart in places, and exposing her shoulders. She looked like she had met some terrible fate.

“Please…help me. I’ll do whatever you want to thank you…” She pleaded this in an almost silent voice.

Her approach toward us was unsteady as if her legs were tangled beneath her.

“Are you okay? Did you get separated from your friends?” Lucy looked worried and was about to run over to her, but I grabbed her arm.

“Makoto? What’s up?”

I didn’t answer.

“She’s just a beat-up girl… You’re not really going to ask her for anything, are you?” Lucy’s expression had turned to anger.

“U-Umm…if I can do it, I will…” the girl continued to plead.

“It’s fine, we’re all in trouble here! You don’t need to thank us! Makoto, let go!”

I let out a deep sigh.

“Come on! I know I’m softhearted! Whatever. I didn’t think you were so unfeeling. I’ll just—”

“Lucy, she’s a monster,” I interrupted.

Sense Danger had been blaring the entire time.

“Wha?” Lucy gaped.

“Tch!” the girl exclaimed, and her pitiful expression morphed into hatred.

“Oh, you’re an arachne.” I hadn’t seen one before. It was a monster with the top half of a beautiful girl and the bottom of a massive spider. Its grotesqueness really made an impact.

“Kyaaaah!” Lucy screamed.

“If you’re scared of spiders, get back,” I warned.

“N-No! I was just surprised. I’m not frightened!”

Suddenly, the arachne leaped forward to attack.

Hmm, what to do?

For starters, how about some *Water Magic: Ice Needle*? I cast the spell quickly, stabbing ice through the arachne’s eyes.

It screeched out in pain.

“There are spider eyes on its body too,” I noticed. “Can it see through them?”

“What’s with that calm observation?! *Ground Magic: Stone Shot*!” Lucy swung her staff and launched a boulder so large that it would take both arms to carry.

I heard an unpleasant squelch as it slammed into the arachne. The beast stopped moving where it was now pinned.

“Is it dead?” Lucy asked.

“Hmm, might just be faking it… Let’s check.”

Water Magic: Ice Needle.

The arachne screamed out again as the needles stabbed through more of its eyes. Yup, it’d just been playing dead.

“Lucy, if you would.”

“No mercy, huh? *Imbue Flame*.”

Lucy cast a spell that imbued the boulder with fire. There was a *womf* and an unpleasant smell. Still crushed beneath the now-flaming boulder, the arachne’s legs started kicking all around.

Finally, it stopped moving.

“Good work, Lucy.”

“What’s with that? She gave me a real shock…”

“Mary told us that there were monsters in the middle layer that could pass for humans. Arachnae, lamiae, harpies, and also some undead. We need to pay attention.”

“I would never mistake a zombie for a human.”

“I think vampires are more like—” I started to say, before pausing. “Wait, Lucy, stop.”

I’d heard a strange noise. Like lots of things crawling.

“H-Hey, Makoto…”

Lucy had noticed too.

*Scuttle, scuttle, scuttle,

us from the bank. If we got trapped in one, we probably wouldn't be able to get out.

"Are there any more monsters?" Lucy asked.

"Yeah. This might be a little rough."

There weren't just arachnae on the shore. Orcs, cave wolves, and goblins were all appearing.

"Lucy, make sure not to bite your tongue!"

"Wha? Hyah!"

Using water magic, I sped us along the lake's surface.

"Dodge!" I screamed.

A huge splash arced up into the air, and a massive snake's mouth closed where we'd just been.

"A-A sea serpent!"

"There must be plenty of monsters in the water as well."

"A-And there are harpies above us…"

There were indeed multiple harpies circling in the air.

"I-It's impossible… No way we can get out of this…" Lucy's eyes were hollow… I figured she needed something good to focus on.

"Look, the monsters don't seem to get along particularly well."

"What?"

The arachnae, orcs, and cave wolves were skirmishing amongst one another. In the water, the sea serpent dragged in the orcs, and their pitiful shrieks were drowned out by the waterfalls.

"Makoto!" Lucy cried out.

"Kya ha ha ha," a harpy cackled as it attacked from behind.

"Too bad, saw you coming," I said. *RPG Player* did give me a 360-degree field of view, after all. I lopped off the harpy's legs with my dagger once it had let its guard down.

"Phew, that was close."

Calm Mind might keep me, well, calm, but I was still somewhat flustered.

Makoto, are you okay? Noah asked.

"Not in the slightest." Goddess, a little more guidance if you would?

"H-Hey, what do we do…?" Lucy asked, tightly holding onto my shoulder. There were the harpies above us, the sea serpents below, and other monsters like the arachnae on the land around us. We had nowhere to run.

It was the first time I'd been so surrounded by monsters.

I set *Calm Mind* to 99% and composed myself. If I panicked, we'd be done for.

You could escape on your own, the goddess suggested.

Don't say things like that! I would never do that.

"Dodge!" The sea serpent had attacked again.

"Lucy, I'm going to focus on dodging, clear us an area on the shore."

"B-But then you won't be able to use water magic!"

She was right, I'd only just borrowed mana from the elementals, so I couldn't do it again in a hurry. On land, I'd be useless.

"Dodge!"

I swung my dagger as I dodged another attack from a harpy. The slash caught it in the wing, and I saw it plummet into the water. There didn't seem to be any end to them. If anything, there were even more than before.

Monsters were fighting among themselves on the shore, dragging more and more into the fray.

This was bad. Real bad.

```
Will you escape alone?
Yes
▶No
```

Come on, don't play around like that, RPG Player. No, just no.

"Lucy, we're going to make it," I promised.

"R-Right."

I held her hand tightly and readied my dagger.

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Has a Reunion

◇ Aya Sasaki's Perspective ◇

"Gah!" I cried out as I woke up. "Wh-What?"

I'm not dead? I thought, patting myself down. My wounds...weren't there? *That's weird—I remember getting torn apart.*

I peered at my surroundings and saw that I was in my favorite spot behind one of the waterfalls. It was just outside the place where I'd been born.

"Mother! Everyone!" I shouted, running toward my home.

It had to be a dream! Everyone is still alive! Right?!

Hope welled in my chest, and I screamed, "Where are you all?!"

No one answered. The stone that usually protected the familiar entrance to our home had been broken from the inside. The cave was usually awash with excitement, but as I approached, I saw that there was no one within. It was deserted.

"Where...are you all?"

The cave seemed so different without everyone there. It felt like I was in a nightmare.

It...wasn't a dream...

"Wah...wahhh...whhh..." Tears started to fall from my eyes.

The sight of their final moments was seared into my mind. I saw their vacant eyes and Mother, covered in blood.

Why had it...

Our cave was shielded by a spell that allowed entry only to lamiae. Enemies shouldn't have been able to attack us in here.

That is, as long as none of our family decided to betray us.

Second sister... No, that bitch. She was the reason my siblings, our older sisters, our mother...

I'll never forgive her! I won't! She won't get away with it!

I didn't know why, but I was still alive, and I had to get revenge. No way was I dying before I did that.

Since waking up and vowing retribution, I'd spent my time hunting monsters, more monsters, and more, more, more, and yet more.

My feelings were particularly vicious any time I saw harpies. I watched them, and whenever their queen left, I tried to take them down once and for all. They could flee from me into the air though, so it was hard to do much.

Recently, those filthy beasts had started to take off as soon as they saw me!

I slept at home in our cave, but no one else was there. The entrance stone was broken, so it wasn't as safe as before, but I didn't know of anywhere else to go.

I'd even thought that the traitorous second sister—bitch—might show up again, but she never did. I wondered where she'd gone.

Maybe she's dead in a ditch somewhere. But, if she's alive...I'll kill her.

Getting revenge on her and the harpies' leader was the only reason I had left to live.

I was weak, though, and I needed to get strong to defeat my enemies.

Mother had once given advice on that topic, something along the lines of, "If you wish to grow strong, then eat humans. They carry blessings of the gods, and eating the strong among their number will strengthen you in turn. You'll become just like me."

I wouldn't be able to beat the harpy queen as I was. For that, I'd need to become stronger… I had no choice, but...

Eating humans...?

Could I do that? After all, I used to be a human too. If that path led to me getting my revenge though, I guess I'd have to.

My heart had been blackened by my thirst for vengeance.

Time passed in that way, and I fought along the whole time.

I was napping one day when a ruckus from the lake woke me up. I leaped up from my resting spot, thinking that some enemy had arrived. However, that didn't seem to be the case.

The monsters were in a tumult. I stared at the uproar and saw them all swarming around something.

Are those human adventurers?

There were two humans in the lake that looked like what my sisters had described. One was a girl with fiery red hair, and the other was a man wearing grayish clothes. I guess the woman was some sort of mage. She had a staff, after all.

But what about the man? He was only equipped with a dagger. Maybe a rogue?

The mage was practically overflowing with mana, and even with the distance between us, I could feel her life force.

If I attacked her... If I ate her...maybe I'd grow stronger.

But before I could try for that, I noticed some foul harpies flying around. I'd clean them up first!

As I tore my way through the harpies, I surveyed the humans.

The mage was clearly the far stronger of the two. The man didn't feel any more powerful than some goblin. Weak, without question. I'd gain no benefit from eating him.

Well, that was my first thought, but...

No... He'll be harder to deal with.

They were currently surrounded by dozens of monsters. The mage was frantically casting and screaming, avoiding the sea serpent and silk threads from the arachnae.

The dagger-wielding man, though... Does he have eyes in the back of his head?

When a harpy would swoop down on him from behind, he only ever dodged a tiny bit, just the bare minimum of movement to avoid the sharp talons. When the sea serpent would leap from the water, the man's light steps always took him out of swallowing range, and he cut through the arachnae's threads like they were nothing.

While his physical abilities were clearly nothing to write home about, he was practically dancing around all the attacks.

I don't understand how he's so calm...? He was constantly inches from losing his life.

Suddenly, there was a lull where he was clear of attacks, and all he did was scratch his cheek slightly like his predicament was just a minor annoyance.

That black-haired guy...he's going to be the issue. I need to take him out first.

I focused on my prey. But the way he scratched his cheek was...almost familiar. That thought didn't cloud my mind though.

I wondered what expression he was wearing. He was facing away from me, so I couldn't really tell. Either way, though, looking at him felt almost nostalgic.

It's just my imagination... I can't have met the guy. Focus, Aya.

Quietly, I waited for my chance.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"There's no end to them," I complained.

"Meteo!" Lucy's magic sent a column of water into the air. It was the seventh time she'd cast that spell. A few monsters were caught in the blast, but there were still plenty left to take the empty places.

"You okay, Lucy?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah, I'm good on mana."

That's just what I'd expect from her—a bottomless mana pool from the king rank mage. However, she seemed close to her limits concentration-wise.

"Lucy, ease up on the magic for a minute and rest. I'll dodge for us."

"G-Got it..."

I put my arm around Lucy's unsteady shoulders and surveyed the area.

There were more than fifty monsters surrounding us. Most of them were low to middling in terms of the threat they posed.

However, I spotted two that we needed to focus on.

The first was a crocodile-looking monster—a king crocodile. There were posters about this beast in the guild. It was the boss of this lake, but it currently didn't seem to be interested in us and instead focused more on

attacking the orcs and goblins. I decided that we shouldn't need to worry about it too much.

The real issue was the other beast, the one that had surveyed the battle before joining in—a lamia.

I'd heard that lamiae normally hunted in packs...

Regardless, this one was on its own. At a glance, it was attacking the harpies and arachnae, apparently uninterested in us...

So is it after us?

Sense Danger was blaring constantly in my mind. I can tell...it's crazy strong.

Most lamiae were of moderate danger at best. But this one was taking down orcs with a single punch and ripping harpy wings off like they were made of tissue paper.

Actually, the harpies had fled the instant they saw the lamia. At least we had that going for us. But I wasn't about to become optimistic, what with how dangerous it was.

Quite a bit of time had passed since the last elemental magic I'd cast. It was getting to the point where I wanted to fire off another blast to scatter the monsters...

But with that lamia gunning for us... I don't want to antagonize it too early. That would leave us vulnerable, and I wanted to distract it.

"Lucy," I said.

"Wh-What?" she sputtered through gasping breaths.

"Actually, never mind." I wanted to warn her, but she didn't seem to have enough spare energy. I'd have to deal with this.

I purposefully turned my back, relying on the 360-degree vision that my *RPG Player* skill gave me.

I wouldn't take my metaphorical eyes off that lamia.

Will it take the bait...?

I kept dodging the other monsters' attacks for a while, always keeping my back to the lamia. I kept my dagger at the ready, waiting. Before long... *Sense Danger* reacted.

Here we go! The lamia had suddenly gotten much closer. *So quick!*

I turned and slashed, but I cut through nothing but air.

"*Water Magic: Ice Needle*!" I cast, using my favorite blinding spell. Needles of ice formed in front of the lamia's eyes and shot off. No monster could avoid them from point-blank range like this.

And yet, somehow...

It dodged?! No way!

That was the first time a monster had dodged that attack.

"Damn it!" The situation was so dire that Lucy and I were stuck in hand-to-hand combat.

My eyes met the lamia's from mere inches away. It had blue skin and eyes, and its features were framed with dark purple hair.

What a pretty monster...

Despite the out-of-place thought, I readied my dagger to protect Lucy. However, the monster didn't attack. The lamia in front of me just stared with wide eyes.

"T-Takatsuki..."

Hang on? What did that monster just say?!

The wailing of *Sense Danger* abruptly fell silent.

"M-Makoto?!" Lucy screamed. "There's a monster *right there*!" From Lucy's perspective, the lamia must have happened out of nowhere.

Despite Lucy's commotion, the lamia cried out in joy. "M-Makoto? Makoto...Takatsuki?!" The monster yelled my full name, even pronouncing it like anyone else from Japan would.

Well, that cinches it... This lamia used to be a member of class 1-A.

But what happened to her? And who was she?

Fine! There's no other method!

"Hey," I said, directing my words toward the lamia. "Is there anywhere we can hide? I wanna get away from the monsters!"

Lamiae lived on this layer of the dungeon, so she'd know the area far better than I.

She pointed sharply. "This way!"

"Got it!"

Following the end of her finger with my eyes, I saw a medium-sized waterfall. She was probably indicating the area beyond it.

"Lucy, hold on tight."

"Wha... G-Got it!"

Lucy clung to my waist. The lamia looked rather miffed at that for some reason, but then...she followed suit?!

"Ahh! Wh-What's happening?!"

"Don't worry, Lucy, we'll be fine." Although, I wasn't entirely sure about that. Was this lamia just lowering our guards like the arachne from earlier?

"Elementals! Help me!" I cried. "*Water Magic: Tianlong*."

Unlike when we'd been in the arachnae's nest, I could use as much water as I wanted over the lake. My spell launched a dragon made of water that was twice as large as the one I'd summoned before.

It raged around the lake, and the monsters surrounding us were blown away. All three of us fled behind the waterfall, sparing the beasts only a sidelong glance.

There was a wide, open area behind the falls, and no monsters were in sight. *Have we gotten away?*

"Phew... That was tough."

"We...made it..." Lucy panted, before leaping back. "Hang on! She's still here!"

The lamia was staring at us...no, at *me*.

"Takatsuki," she said.

"Y-Yes?" I answered instinctively. *Who is she?*

"It really is you..." She started patting me down.

R-Riiight... Considering how overfamiliar she is...she's definitely someone I know. And we must be pretty close too...

"What are you two doing?" Lucy demanded, looking aghast at us from a little ways away. I guess from her perspective it looked like a monster was hugging me.

The lamia completely blocked out Lucy and just continued staring at me. As she did, I looked into her deep blue eyes, just as her gaze was boring into mine.

Were those tears?

"Uhm, by the way..." I said, deciding to start things off. The lamia had been in class 1-A and was likely someone who had spoken familiarly to me back then. Other than Fujiyan, there was only one person I could think of. She didn't look anything like before, but...

"You're Sasa, right?"

I can always apologize if I'm wrong.

She paused for a moment, then asked, "Why is that even a question? Didn't you know it was me?"

Ack, she looks super unhappy.

"Ah, well... You look completely different."

"Oh, right. Here, *human disguise*."

Whoa, the lamia turned into a human...wait just a minute?!

"Put some damn clothes on!" Lucy shouted.

Yup, Lucy was quite right—the now-human lamia was completely in the buff. I panicked a bit and turned around.

“Sasa! Don’t you have any clothes?!”

“I mean, I’m a monster,” she replied. “I always look like this.”

Has she lost her sense of shame as well?

“I’ll lend you this,” Lucy said before passing over her cloak.

“Thanks,” Sasa wrapped it around her body like a dress.

“Here, have this too,” I told her. I placed my jacket over her shoulders.

Great, now I can actually look at her as we talk.

“It’s been a while, Sasa,” I greeted.

“Takatsuki!”

Oof, what a tight hug, I thought as a soft sensation pressed into my body.

“Makoto, who’s this?” Lucy asked unhappily.

Right, I need to introduce them. “Sorry, my bad. This is Aya Sasaki. She comes from the same world as I do. Sasa, this is Lucy, she’s in my party.”

The two of them looked at each other suspiciously.

“Nice to meet you, Lucy,” Sasa spoke first.

“You too, Aya. Now get off him.”

“We haven’t seen each other in forever, so it’s fine… Wait, you’re not his girlfriend, are you?”

“I’m not!” Lucy denied.

Sasa let out a slight sigh of relief. “See, no problem then.”

“Ughhh.”

I didn’t understand the issue, but it looked like Lucy had given in.

“Sasa, what are you doing as a lamia in a place like this?” There was so much I wanted to ask.

“Takatsuki! Listen to this!” she exclaimed, holding even tighter to me.

Lucy was glaring dubiously at us.

Calm down, Lucy, I’m sure Sasa’s had it tough. Be nice!

“Listen here, I—”

“—and then…” Sasa told us the full story of her life and about struggles with the lamiae.

“I won’t let that traitor get away with it!” Lucy shouted. “I’ll blast her with my magic, Aya!”

“R-Right. Thank you…Lucy.”

Lucy was impulsive on occasion, and so her sympathy must have gotten her angry. She really was a kind girl.

“Takatsuki?” Sasa asked. “What’s wrong?”

I was honestly in shock. Sasa had been reincarnated as a lamia. She’d lived in a dungeon, fighting swarms of monsters every day.

She was playing on hard mode while I was cruising through life way easier…

Truthfully, when I'd found out my stats in the temple, I'd been sure that out of everyone in class 1-A, *I* had it the most difficult.

But my struggles were nothing compared to Sasa's.

"I...need to work harder," I muttered.

"You've had it tough, Takatsuki," Sasa said, sounding sympathetic for some reason.

"You've had it worse," I replied, before asking the question that was on my mind. "By the way, we want to get back to the upper layer. Do you know the way?"

"To the upper layer? I know that my sisters mentioned a path up from the lake."

"All right! Let's go, Lucy, we can get out of here."

Sasa seemed anxious all of a sudden. "Hey, can...can I come with you?"

"Of course you can. Let's go back together."

I could hardly *leave* her here.

That response earned me another hug. Lucy just gave us the evil eye.

Finally, we headed off toward the upper layer.

"It's a bit narrow," Sasa warned us. "Be careful."

"I wouldn't call it narrow," I mumbled.

"More like we barely fit..."

The way was less of a "path" and more of a hole.

"It's easy as a lamia though," Sasa cheered.

"The rocks are hurting my knees..." Lucy moaned.

"Sasa, how much longer?"

"We should be out soon. Here's the exit."

Crawling from the hole, we burst into the water cavern.

"There's no one here," Lucy commented.

"Well, it's not even dawn," I said.

Lucy seemed shocked by that statement. "What?! We've been down there that long?"

"Whoa, so this is the upper layer." Sasa's head was rapidly moving back and forth as she tried to look at everything.

"You've never been up here before?" I asked.

"No... I heard it was dangerous because there are so many humans."

"So the monsters see the upper layer as dangerous..." That was pretty funny.

"Makoto, where exactly are we?" Lucy asked.

"Probably about midway between the entrance and the waterfall."

I checked with *Mapping* and *Scout*, but luckily, I could only find weak monsters.

"Looks like we're out safe."

After an entire day, we'd managed to escape Labyrinthos. As we left the dungeon, the sun was just rising, signaling daybreak.

◇ Fujiyan's Perspective ◇

My esteemed Tackie and Lucy hadn't returned from Labyrinthos that night.

"Boss, I can go check it out if you're that worried'h," Lady Nina suggested.

"Hmm... There has been an announcement made of a dragon appearing on the upper level. I wager even you could not fight such a beast alone."

"I'd manage to escape at least'h."

I was concerned. When the guild had notified everyone about the dragon, the whole town had raised an uproar.

Ordinarily, there was a daily list of people who had gone missing. Yesterday, dozens of people had been added to that list, and I'd been shocked the instant I spied my friends' names on it. I felt in no state to negotiate and had called a halt to all of my appointments for the day.

Even now, there was no sign of them.

"I wonder if it appeared because of the blight dragon'h?" Lady Nina suggested.

"Such are the rumors..."

There was a beast called the blight dragon within Labyrinthos. It was a blasphemous thing, such that even the monsters of the dungeon fled its presence.

Truly, it was an evil creature. It's even said that it served the Great Demon Lord a millennium ago. The adventurers were all talking of the monsters within the dungeon, and of the beasts' behavior becoming suddenly aberrant due to the blight dragon's influence.

"I fervently hope that they were not unfortunate enough to encounter it," I stated.

"I heard that it appeared around the Great Waterfalls. I think that Mister Takatsuki said he would be heading for them last night'h."

"I certainly seem to recall that..." *Worrying, indeed.*

"He is someone that can remain calm even in the face of a powerful monster. I'm sure he'll be fine'h!"

"That is true. But I cannot calm myself whilst simply waiting."

"Then maybe we should go to the guild aga..." Lady Nina started before trailing off. But then, she began again with gusto. "Boss! I heard Mister Takatsuki'h!"

"What?!"

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"My esteemed Tackie!"

Fujiyan thundered toward us.

"Miss Lucy! You're safe! Oh, and who is this'h?" Nina asked. But then, her smile instantly transformed into a sharp look.

She must have noticed that Sasa's aura felt like a monster's.

"Oh, she comes from the same world as Fujiyan and me. It's all complicated, so can we talk inside?"

“C-Could it be?! Lady Sasaki?!” Fujiyan exclaimed in surprise. Wow, he’d noticed right away.

I guess her human glamour included features that were quite a bit similar to her old appearance.

“You realized immediately, Fujiwara,” Sasa said. “Takatsuki didn’t even notice at first.”

“Hey, don’t say that,” I complained. I had been exhausted from fighting through the night.

We all returned to Fujiyan’s rented room and explained the whole story.

“To think…such a thing has happened,” Fujiyan commented.

“Miss Sasaki… You have suffered so much’h,” Nina added. Both of them were teary-eyed after hearing her tale, and I found myself thinking that they were all really good people. Since yesterday, both of them had been waiting for us the whole time.

By the way, Sasa had changed clothes now.

The only girls’ clothes we had on hand were Nina’s, so Sasa was wearing a tank top and shorts. Now that I was seeing her in a well-lit place, her skin seemed awfully pale. There was a slight purple tint to her black hair, but her features were the same as Sasa’s. It reminded me so much of how things used to be.

“Makoto, why are you staring so much?” Lucy interjected, poking me. That seemed to draw Sasa’s attention, so she looked our way.

Her blank face was just the same as always.

“What are you planning now, Sasa?” I asked, even if I didn’t really need to. I already knew her goal.

“I’m getting revenge for my family.”

I could feel the resolve in her voice. She always stubbornly stuck to her convictions once she decided on something.

She really hadn’t changed at all.

“But if you’re alone’h…” Nina looked at Fujiyan like she wanted to say something. Lucy stared at me the same way.

```
Will you aid Aya Sasaki with her vengeance?
▶Yes
No
```

I didn’t even need to think—she was my best friend.

I selected “Yes” on the *RPG Player* screen.

I had no idea what kind of enemy the queen of the harpies would be, but she’d definitely be some kind of boss. A worthy opponent!

Don’t go too far, Makoto, the goddess warned me, apparently realizing my excitement.

It'll be fine. I promise to be careful, I thought back at her. But there was something else I needed to say. I had to make absolutely sure, for Sasa as well.

Goddess, thank you. Thanks to your guidance I managed to reunite with my precious friend.

Oh, quite right, aren't you happy? Her voice wasn't quite as long-suffering as she tried to make it sound.

I turned my attention to Fujiyan. "Let's get a plan together to take down the harpy queen."

"Hmm, we require more intel first."

Both of us exchanged grins. That's friendship for you—we were on the same wavelength.

Lucy seemed surprised. "You're all fired up."

"Of course! We have to help a classmate in need."

"Thank you, Takatsuki, Fujiwara..." Sasa said tearfully.

"The harpy queen sounds like a rather formidable foe, though'h," Nina commented. She showed us the guild's wanted poster.

"Labyrinthos, middle layer. Harpy queen and children. Reward: Three million Gald (Calamity candidate)."

"Does that mean she's strong?" I asked.

"Hmm, the swarm as a whole will probably be harder to deal with than the griffin'h."

"Wow, even stronger than that..." Lucy muttered unhappily.

"The children don't matter. I can take down a normal harpy with one hit," Sasa declared, and her clenched fist was oddly reassuring. She'd apparently gotten pretty combative.

"By the way, Fujiyan, is Sasa a normal lamia?"

She seemed confused by that question. "Wait, what do you mean?"

"It's just, you seem way stronger than an average one."

"I am similarly curious," Fujiyan admitted. "From your tale, you seemed to have the ability to come back to life after you thought you were dead. Perhaps this can answer our queries."

The item in Fujiyan's hand was a Soul Book.

"I thought that only the church could get those?" Or more accurately, that only the church could buy them.

"There is more than one way to skin a cat," he commented with a chuckle. "Here, Lady Sasaki, hold this if you would."

"Hm, what is it?" she asked.

"It'll tell us your stats and skills," I answered. As I spoke, the book lit up. Apparently, it had finished the analysis.

"So, uh, how do I look at them?"

"Give it here," I said, tugging the Soul Book from her and opening it up for everyone to see.

Aya Sasaki: Lamia

Level: 34
Unique Skills: Transformation, Evolution, Action Game Player...
Normal Skills: *None*
Strength: XX
Stamina: XX
Resistance: XX
Agility: XX
.....
.....
...
“She’s over level thirty?!” I yelled.
“Whoa, her stats are crazy!”
“I lost’h...” Nina was in shock. Sasa had higher stats than a gold rank adventurer.
“You got your otherworlder bonus too, Sasa.”
“Is it so incredible?” Sasa asked with a tilt of her head.
“Your stats are superb,” Fujiyan told her. “But it is your skills that are truly intriguing.”
“Uh, so I have unique skills called *Transformation*, *Evolution*, and...huh?”
That last skill was the interesting one.
“*Action Game Player*?” Sasa read out from the Soul Book.
“Huh, that name...” Lucy muttered. “It sounds similar to Makoto’s skill.”
“And the boss’s’h,” Nina commented.
“Let us peruse further,” Fujiyan said, peering into the book.
“Allows the use of *Dash*, *Charged Attack*, and *Double Jump* as basic actions... Lady Sasaki, can you do so?”
“Uh, well I think I remember suddenly speeding up during combat. Is that a skill?”
“*Dash* triples speed?!” Fujiyan cried out.
“Tripling Miss Sasaki’s stats would make that a rather powerful skill’h.”
That’s great, they’re simple skills to use, unlike mine.
“You hit the jackpot, Sasa.”
“Hmm, I guess so.” She looked a bit bemused.
“No, the most ridiculous skill is this,” Fujiyan said, pointing out some of the text.
*“Extra Lives: ⅕ (*Activated above level 30*)” was written as a skill.*
“That’s...”
Extra lives... It must be like the life system that appeared all the time in action games—the one that lets the player retry even if they die.
Seriously? She could die and come back to life?! Th-That’s OP!
“Lady Sasaki, we seem to have discovered the reason you survived the harpy queen,” Fujiyan said with a sigh.
“Huh? What kind of skill is that?” Lucy asked.
“Boss, explain please’h.”
“Hey, Takatsuki, what does he mean?”

“Come on, Sasa, you know this!” I exclaimed.

Are you a gamer or not?!

“Extra lives is a piece of terminology from our world. It means that you can retry something a certain number of times,” Fujiyan explained.

“Retry?” Lucy asked. She hadn’t quite parsed the implication.

“I’m just assuming here,” I added, “but *Extra Lives* ⅘ would mean…that you can come back from the dead five times.”

“Oh, so that’s why it’s gone down to four,” Sasa said, finally understanding.

“C-Come back from the dead?” Lucy asked blankly.

“Would that be similar to the saint rank skill *Revival*’h?”

“Well…probably.”

Lucy and Nina both gave an *eep*, finally seeming to understand.

“Getting a *Revival* from the church costs millions…” Lucy commented.

“Being able to revive yourself is practically divine providence’h…”

Yup, our classmate’s skills are OP.

“Well,” I said, “now that we know how broken Sasa’s skills are, let’s get some rest. I’m dead on my feet here.”

“Yeah, I’m swaying,” Lucy agreed.

“Indeed. Let us retire abed and rest before we begin our strategizing in earnest.”

In no time, Lucy and I were knocked out and sleeping like logs.

◇

“Now, let us begin planning the strategy to defeat the harpy queen,” Fujiyan declared.

“Yeah!” we all cheered. Sasa was all fired up, and the rest of us offered polite applause.

“First off will be information sharing. As you slept, I informed the guild that the two of you had returned.”

“Yeah, we forgot to do that,” I admitted. That’s Fujiyan for you, paying attention to every last detail.

“We also reported the ruffians you encountered’h,” Nina added.

Fujiyan followed up. “Apparently, they have yet to return.”

“Which means…” I breathed. *They hadn’t gotten away…*

“Well they were bad guys, so it’s obvious!” Lucy declared.

“It hurts my soul, but at least we don’t need to worry about getting attacked again.” I thanked Fujiyan and Nina for their effort.

“Next, Lady Sasaki.”

“Me?”

Sasa seemed upbeat, even out of Labyrinthos. She’d evidently gone shopping with Nina because she was now wearing a dress of some kind.

“Here is your adventurer card.”

“Wait? You can get them outside of the adventurer’s guild?”

Probably not. No one other than the guild issued them, and getting one from anywhere else was illegal.

Well, it is *coming from Fujiyan...* He'd probably gotten the card through some backroom deal or the like. Fujiyan's rueful smile just underlined my suspicions.

"Uh, it says my name's Aya Sasaki and my race is...demi-human?"

"You would be exposed as a monster if we went to the guild to have it done normally," Fujiyan stated.

Lucy nodded. "Yeah, that's true."

"Is that so bad?" I asked.

Nina was looking at me, aghast. "Mister Takatsuki..."

"Monsters and demons cannot have adventurer cards. After all, to the people of this world, they are targets for extermination," Fujiyan explained.

"I guess that makes sense," I admitted.

Wait, what about Lucy then? I glanced toward her, but she avoided my eyes. I'm sure she said she was half-elf and half-demon.

Lucy's card just called her an elf. She must have gone through the back channels as well. After all, she was a big deal in her village.

"Now we just need to hide the fact that she's a lamia."

"Right, Miss Sasaki is pale, so if anyone asks, she can answer that she's a mermaid'h," Nina offered. "They only really show up in the south, so you shouldn't need to worry about meeting one'h."

She and Fujiyan had already thought through it all. They'd beaten us to the punch.

"Now, to business," Fujiyan said, spreading out the information on the harpy queen along with other sheets of paper.

Everyone looked them over. All of it seemed like information about our target.

"Harpies are weak to fire magic?"

"Well, their wings probably burn well," I reasoned. "You're up for that, Lucy."

"Yeah, leave it to me!" she cheered, flexing her biceps. Fire magic was great against monsters.

"How many of the harpies are there'h?"

"There were about a hundred of us lamiae, so I think there'd be about the same number," Sasa answered.

"I would rather avoid facing such a force head-on," Fujiyan admitted.

"Could we get them all with a surprise attack?"

"Miss Lucy's fire magic might be able to manage it'h..."

"We shouldn't rely too much on Lucy's butterfinger magic," I warned.

"Makoto! That's mean!" Lucy complained, smacking me lightly.

From my other side, Sasa clapped me on the shoulder. I was currently sitting right between her and Lucy, and they both seemed eager to knock me around a little.

"What about your water magic?" Sasa asked. "That was incredible as well."

“Water magic isn’t great offensively,” I admitted. “The water dragon spell I used pushed the monsters away, but it didn’t defeat them. I guess some might’ve drowned, though.”

“You mean *Tianlong*?! That’s ultra rank magic, isn’t it’h?!” Nina asked, shocked.

“I borrowed mana from the elementals. On my own, I can’t use ultra rank magic.”

“It is nothing to sneeze at, even so,” Fujiyan stated.

“Yeah, you were amazing,” Sasa said, tightening her grip on me.

Lucy grabbed hold of my arm and did the same. It felt pretty warm since she had a high body temperature to begin with.

“I’ll take the offense,” Lucy declared. “The problem is locating the boss.”

“I think they’ll have a similar kind of home to the lamiae,” Sasa noted, gripping even tighter. In contrast to Lucy, her skin felt cold to the touch. *It must have something to do with her being a lamia...*

These two were exact opposites. But forget that, I was getting pretty cramped between them like this…I couldn’t move.

“Hmm, I asked around much of the guild, but there was no information on where the harpies might live.”

“So we’ve got to find it ourselves…” Sasa muttered.

“Let’s split up then. Sasa and I will search Labyrinthos. Fujiyan, would you mind taking Lucy with you? She and Nina can ask around the town.”

“What?! Why? I want to go to the dungeon too!” Lucy complained.

“Miss Lucy, they may encounter the dragon… It’s dangerous’h.”

“Urk, that’s true… What about you then, Makoto?!”

“I can at least run away if there’s water around. I also need to talk with the water elementals every day so I can use elemental magic.”

“Do you?” Sasa asked. “That seems like a pretty harsh requirement.”

“Maybe, but I can use ultra rank magic because of it.”

“So…I just need to guide you around, right?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed, “and we can practice your skills at the same time. I think you should learn *Stealth*.”

“Got it. You seem like you’re having fun,” she said.

“What?” *Did I?*

Well, it was the first time we’d ever planned the takedown of a boss like this, and it *was* exciting.

“Sorry, Sasa, I should take it more seriously.”

“Nah, I’d be all depressed if I were on my own. I’m glad you’re all helping.” Her expression was far softer than it had been yesterday.

“Listen up, Makoto,” Lucy said, pinching my cheek. “You’re not allowed to do anything strange together just because you’re alone, got it?”

“What do you mean, strange?” I asked, brushing her hand away.

“You’re training with me in the evenings,” she declared instead of answering.

“Obviously I will—your magic’s the foundation of our plan.”

“Right!”

Okay, we’ve got a general strategy.

“All right, people, let’s get started,” I said. Everyone answered with firm nods.

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Makes Preparations

◇ Aya Sasaki's Perspective ◇

"How's it going, Sasa? Think you'll manage *Stealth*?" Takatsuki asked me this as I practiced the skill in question.

"Yeah, I think I've got a handle on it. It's difficult though."

We were currently in the middle layer of Labyrinthos, in a space behind a big waterfall. I used to love this place, but now it kept reminding me of my family, so being here was depressing.

At that moment though, I wasn't sad.

I looked to my side and saw Takatsuki with his hand open in the air, mumbling something.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm speaking to the elementals around here. Trying to build a relationship."

"Uh, does that make your elemental magic stronger?"

He responded with a rueful smile. "Yup, it's pretty idiosyncratic as far as magic goes."

"So it's going well?"

"Yeah, they're all pretty friendly here. Easy to speak with as well."

"Hmm..." I couldn't see any of these elementals, so it didn't quite feel real to me, but at least he was having fun.

A while ago, I'd thought that Takatsuki would feel right at home in this world, and it seems that I'd been correct. I kept watching him idly as I practiced *Stealth* some more. The time passed peacefully, with me closing my eyes periodically to practice the skill.

Suddenly, Takatsuki's sharp voice shattered the silence. "Sasa! Harpies!"

I gasped as a thrill ran up my back, and the slight excitement that had buoyed my heart froze. I could see several harpies circling in the air above the cave as if they were looking for prey. My teeth ground together.

They're flying around like they own the place, but this was lamiae territory!

Takatsuki seemed to guess what I was feeling, and he called out calmly to me. "Sasa, we'll make sure we're ready and take them down."

"Right," I answered after a moment.

"By the way, do they always appear from over there?"

"Uh... As far as I can remember, they come from the direction of the big hole, the one toward the light."

"So, that means they might live around there, right?" he asked.

“We can’t fly though, so we can’t get to them…” I’d also thought that their nest was up toward the ceiling, probably over the lake. There wasn’t a path to reach it though.

“We’ll talk it over with everyone else later… The harpies are gone.”

He was right—they’d flown off further into the caves around the lake.

“It’s fine now.”

“Yeah.”

We returned to our original actions, mostly just training quietly and making sure we weren’t noticed by monsters. But compared to how it’d felt when I’d been alone in this dungeon, this was much more pleasant.

Still… I thought to myself. I didn’t feel entirely at ease; something was bothering me. *We* are *on our own at least.*

Keeping my voice as nonchalant as possible, I spoke to Takatsuki. “Hey, what kind of relationship do you have with Lucy?”

“Eh? What brings that up?” he asked, turning to look at me blankly.

Oops, that might have been a bit blunt. Did it put him off? I’m just so curious though!

The red-headed elf in his party was beautiful, and even though she’d been a bit standoffish at first, she was actually really nice to talk to. Also, she had so much of her body on display. I was a girl and even my heart skipped a beat at the sight.

However, the biggest thing on my mind was the fact that she was the only person in Takatsuki’s party.

The only one! I’d never even seen him speak with a girl besides me, whether it was in middle or high school! Maybe he had gotten used to girls since he’d come to this world?

“I’m not sure what to tell you. She’s my friend, and we’ve been in a party together for about half a year.”

“J-Just the two of you, right?”

“We sometimes joined up with Fujiyan or other adventurers, but for the majority of my time here, I guess I was mostly solo.”

“Solo… You mean you were on your own?”

“It was fun. I’m a pro at goblin hunting, you know.” He snorted, looking vaguely smug for some reason. It was exactly the same look he used to wear when he’d spent his entire break playing games on his own.

He hasn’t changed at all, I thought nostalgically. What a relief.

“Still, we’ve got you now, so it’s a three-person party.”

“What?” I asked, shocked at the sudden statement.

“Oh? Did you not want to join?”

“No! Of course I do!” I was stunned. Honestly, I’d thought that I would need to *ask* to join them.

But no, I’m already in the party!

“I should probably talk to Lucy about it, though.”

I gave him a flat look.

“It’ll be fine,” he assured me. “I doubt she’ll have a problem with it.”

“R…Right.”

He seemed so free when talking about her and using her first name. As far as I knew, he’d never been quite that comfortable when around girls or when talking about them. I guessed that he must be pretty close with her.

Although, it looks like the first name thing is normal in this world…

Lucy *had* called me Aya to begin with, after all.

Maybe I should start calling him Makoto? Though changing how I talk to him out of nowhere would seem pretty strange… Hmm.

I glanced over at him and saw that he was still training his elemental magic, face locked in a serious expression.

With some conflicted feelings still present in my heart, I continued honing my own skills.

◇ Lucy’s Perspective ◇

“Let’s get to practicing then!” I said to Makoto after we’d finished dinner and had left the town.

I’d spent the whole day with Fujiyan and Nina.

We’d gone to gather info on the harpy queen from the guild and had even asked some merchants, but we hadn’t gotten much. All the current rumors were focused on the blight dragon, the Soleil Knights, and the Hero of Light.

“Did you find out anything interesting?” Makoto asked while practicing his water magic.

“Apparently, the Soleil Knights will be heading out to kill the blight dragon in two or three days.”

“Oh, maybe the monsters in Labyrinthos will calm down once they’re done.”

“That’s the rumor. Everyone’s saying that the dragon appearing on the upper layer means fewer expeditions, so business is bad.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” As he spoke, Makoto created a tiny water dragon and made it flutter around the area. That trick had been a standard *Waterball* until recently! He was getting much more detailed with his magic.

“What about you, Lucy? How many *Stone Shots* can you create now?”

“Only three…” I admitted.

“Oh, well done, you’re getting better.”

Said the guy with ten mini water dragons flying around… I couldn’t really take any joy from his praise.

“How can you manage all that detail?”

“I figured it out once I got my water magic mastery over 120.”

“Forget I ever asked,” I said after blinking. That wasn’t helpful at all. Over 120? What the hell?

My mastery for fire magic was 15, and it was 11 for ground magic. The reason ground magic was easier for me to use was because of my staff. Well, more accurately, it was thanks to the magic that the giant had imbued my staff with.

Right now, I was training a combination of ground and fire magic to increase the number of Meteos I could cast.

We were going to be up against harpies, and lots of them, so our aim was to take out as many as possible with our opener. That's what Makoto had said at least.

The harpy queen... She's the enemy of the lamiae and Aya Sasaki's foe as well.

Our adventure this time had come about because of a lamia girl that I'd just gotten to know. She'd come from another world and had been reincarnated as a monster. She was also Makoto's friend.

I wonder what kind of relationship they had.

He'd originally told us that "she was a friend I studied with in school."

Makoto had laughed and said that she'd used to be much quieter, which had made her smack him on the back of the head and yell, "What's that supposed to mean?!"

They seemed much closer than classmates that just happened to get along. It was obvious by their interactions that they'd spent a lot of time together.

And they were alone in the dungeon today... Plus, he invited her to our party.

I didn't exactly have any complaints about that. She was Makoto and Fujiyan's friend, and there was no one else in this world that she knew. She'd also been reincarnated as a monster, so she couldn't exactly stay with people that didn't understand the circumstances.

So of course we'd help her. Still, there was something that bothered me.

I think she might have feelings for Makoto...maybe.

The way she looked at him...it was the look of someone who carried affection for the object of their gaze.

It was the same way I looked at him.

"By the way, Lucy, mind going around the town with Sasa tomorrow?"

"What? Ahh!" The sudden question made me drop the *Stone Shots* I'd been controlling, and the heated rocks fell to the ground.

"A-Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just me, though? What are you doing?"

"I'm going to keep building relationships with the elementals."

"Will you be all right in Labyrinthos on your own?" I asked.

"I've mapped out all the escape routes, so I should be fine. I want you to teach her how to shop and use the money here."

"G-Got it."

On my own with Aya? What would we talk about?

We finished training and the day drew to an end, though my feelings were still conflicted.

The next day, Aya showed up at the place we'd chosen to meet.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said.

Her hair was tied into two tails, and she was wearing a shirt adorned with ribbons, along with a skirt. She looked pretty plain at a glance, but the garments all seemed quite stylish in the fine details.

Was that the fashion in her world?

"Let's head off then," I suggested, and the pair of us began to walk around the town.

"So, this is the money..." I explained when it came up. "The market price for this is around..."

"Hmm, I get it," Aya said once I'd finished explaining. "And what about this?"

"Well, that..." I answered her questions as they cropped up.

"I feel like I get it now. Thank you, Lucy."

We spent a while looking at all the different things on sale, and I taught Aya about how much our currency was worth and what kind of things you could buy in the shops.

She was quick on the uptake and soon had the essentials down.

Afterward, we went to a restaurant for lunch. Aya and I ordered pasta with tomato sauce and bacon, along with some tea to drink.

"Wow! That looks great," Aya exclaimed. "Hey, Lucy, they have pasta here as well!"

"They do. It was an otherworlder that made it popular in the first place."

"Oh, that makes sense."

Aya was happily packing the pasta away.

Cute... She was like a hamster, and I wanted to protect her. *Well, she's about as strong as Nina...* In other words, just as strong as a gold rank adventurer. Or rather, far, *far* stronger than me.

Once we'd finished lunch and were eating our desserts and drinking tea, I explained how things worked in this world.

But then, the question came up. "What were you doing this morning by the way?" I asked. She'd told me that she had some plans for the morning, so we'd need to leave later.

"Er, well, I was making lunch for Takatsuki to take into the dungeon."

"What?" I'd never even thought of that! Seriously? We'd been adventuring so many times and I'd never done something like that...

"R-Right... What kind of things does he like?" I always saw him eating onigiri and skewers back in Macallan, so he must like those at least. Maybe I could make him some onigiri... Not that I knew how.

"Hmm, well, he likes junk food, so anything with heavy seasoning... I heard adventurers have a pretty unbalanced diet though, so today, I gave him sandwiches with lots of vegetables."

I had no words.

Just how thoughtful was she? Had I already lost?

Afterward, we kept talking about quite a lot of things, but...

"Takatsuki didn't really make many friends at school," she said. "He was so nervous when I first spoke to him too. I was shocked the first time I saw

his room. There wasn't anything in it! He either sold or threw out stuff he didn't use. You know, he was always pretty laid-back, but he's gotten even cooler in this world. I think he mentioned a *Calm Mind* skill? I want that too."

Everything she had to say was about Makoto. She and I didn't have anything in common to talk about, so I'd asked her about what he used to be like. But she just didn't stop talking!

She likes him way too much! A-And we're going to be in the same party? My heart shuddered at that thought.

She's his old friend, and she knows a ton about his past...

Makoto had been so happy when he'd met her again.

It felt as if, before I knew it, those two would be like Jean and Emily, *dating*, and I'd be left on my own... *I-I don't want that! Forget Jean, I just don't want Makoto dating any other girl! No!*

I was in his party first! And he'd said I was his first teammate as well! But..if things keep up like this...

"Takatsuki... It's been so long."

"Too long, I've missed you, Sasa."

"I'm so happy!" She hugged him. "What about Lucy, though?"

"What about her?"

"I'm sure she has feelings for you."

"She does? But you're the only one I feel that way for." His teeth sparkled.

"Takatsuki...I love you!" She grabbed him tightly.

"I love you too." He held her back.

Noooooo!!!

Just imagining it was so depressing.

It all felt so real! Makoto couldn't feel that way!

Would that future come to pass...?

I-I need to do something... I vowed.

◇ Aya Sasaki's Perspective ◇

Lucy and I had gone around the town.

It was the first time I'd had any contact with the culture of this world, and everything was so new. I couldn't just gawk like a tourist forever. Takatsuki had invited me to join his party, so I needed to be useful!

Still though... *It's so gooood.*

The food in this human town was delicious! It was completely different from lamia cuisine!

Tomato pasta, apple pie, sugary milk tea!

I'm so glad that I'm still alive...

Well, technically, I'd been reborn, but I'd gotten to meet Takatsuki again, and had eaten so much tasty food! There were a lot of things to overcome, but I was glad I hadn't given up... I'd lived through it!

I bit into the joys of life with much relish.

"You look like you're really enjoying that," Lucy commented.

"I-I do?" I asked, my heart jolting as Lucy looked at me with a smile.

Her bright, wine-red eyes were framed by glossy crimson hair.

Her face was a little sharp, but still attractive, and her pointed ears that poked out were the sign that she was an elf.

Right, Lucy was an elf. *She's so pretty.*

I was a girl myself, and even I was taken with how beautiful she was. And this was Takatsuki's teammate. Right, his *teammate*...not his partner.

Adventurers often spend days with only each other for company though, right?

Could some mistake have happened during that time? Or was my worldview just different from the prevailing one here? Takatsuki was a guy though, so surely he'd have grown feelings for such a cute girl, especially if he'd spent so much time with her.

"The Makoto you describe feels a bit different than the one I know," Lucy commented.

She was right—he did give off a different impression now compared to when we'd been in school.

"What's he like now then?" I asked idly.

"I'll never forget when I first met him. I was being attacked by a big ogre and he dashed in and just took it out, even though apparently they're supposed to be beyond the skill of bronze rank adventurers!" She continued the tales of Takatsuki's victories. "He let himself get hurt while battling a griffin, just so he could use his magic to defeat it! We also fought a chimera in a dungeon and..."

That question had prompted a machine-gun barrage of praise from Lucy. Her cheeks were flushed as she excitedly talked about him.

Wh-Whoa... Lucy's head over heels for Takatsuki...

She wasn't even trying to hide how she felt. Were they really not dating? Maybe they just hadn't told me?

"Hey, Makoto? Aren't you going to tell Aya about us?"

"Sasa isn't used to this world yet, so I'll tell her once she's relaxed a bit."

"You can't use that as an excuse to cheat, you hear?"

"Don't be silly, I've only got eyes for you." His gaze glinted.

"Makoto... I love you..." She hugged him tightly.

"I love you too." He hugged her back.

Argh! I imagined the whole thing!

It's...it's fine, right? Takatsuki had said they were teammates. And so, I kept my conflicted feelings in my chest while we continued our shopping.

◇ Meanwhile... Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"Sorry to drag you into this, Nina," I said.

"No worries'h. The boss told me to help you as much as I can'h."

We weren't in Labyrinthos, but outside of it, and we were looking for the ceiling of the lake. It was just Nina and me because we were the only two that could use *Stealth*. Sasa was still learning it. We'd spent three whole days using *Mapping* in the dungeon and we still hadn't found a path to the harpy nest.

They were flying monsters though, so there might not even *be* one.

Therefore, we were looking for the hole, the one above the lake that opened to the sky.

"There are so many weeds," I grumbled. The area of the forest outside of the dungeon had been left to grow wild.

"Mister Takatsuki, please be careful. We aren't inside the dungeon, but there still might be monsters around'h."

"Right, we should use my *Scouting* skill and your *Eavesdropping* skill to keep a lookout."

Nina was a rabbit beastwoman, so she had particularly keen hearing, even compared to other beastmen. With her ears, she could probably hear things that were several kilometers away.

"There's a monster," I commented.

"Right, let's go around it'h."

We didn't want to get into any avoidable battles, so we constantly took detours when we sensed monsters. That, however, made our journey take quite a bit of time.

We continued silently, cutting through the greenery and progressing onward.

Ugh, it hurts not being able to carry on a decent conversation with her.

If it'd been Fujiyan here instead of Nina, I wouldn't have struggled at all. Just as the thought passed through my mind, Nina brought up a topic.

"Mister Takatsuki, you were friends with the boss in your original world, weren't you'h?"

"I was, though only for about a year," I admitted.

Still, he'd been so helpful to me. I couldn't thank him enough.

"There's something I'd like to ask you'h."

"What is it?" Something about Fujiyan?

"What kind of woman does the boss like'h?"

So that was what she wanted to know…and she was asking someone like me, who'd been single as long as he'd lived. Still, Nina had been a great deal of help to me, so I'd answer her as best I could.

"Fujiyan likes girls with animal ears."

That was true, without a doubt. After all, he'd talked *my* ears off about them often enough when we'd gone drinking in the Catgirl Cantina…

"I know that already'h…" she muttered, her long ears drooping.

"Is something bothering you?" I asked.

"He never takes me up on it, no matter what moves I make'h."

I had no words.

“I went to his room wearing something pretty risque, but he didn’t do anything’h…”

This was way more adult than I’d expected! *I-I can’t…it’s too much for me.*

Fujiyan, the hell are you doing?! Nina’s super cute, isn’t she?!

“Maybe he hasn’t realized how I feel’h…”

“Nah, I doubt that.” He’s definitely noticed, so you’re all good! He can read minds, after all.

“Now that it’s come to this, maybe I’ll have to just pay him a *visit’h*…”

Whoa…she’s practically a predator, even though she’s a rabbit!

“The Macallan girl seems to have feelings for him as well’h.”

“Oh, Christina, right?”

“That filthy bitch’h!” Nina said angrily. “She made so many demands in exchange for helping the boss with his airship’h!”

Well, that’s what a sponsor did.

“I’ll get it out of him at some point,” I told her.

“Please do’h!”

I didn’t think much about the promise, but maybe that was for the best.

As we talked, we reached our goal.

“According to my *Mapping*, we should now be right above the lake,” I said.

“Your skill is quite something. Especially because it can cover such a wide area’h.”

“It is?” I hadn’t thought much about it, but still… “Let’s stop here. I can sense some harpies.”

“Seems like they’re lookouts’h. I hear three of them’h.”

My *Scouting* had only picked up two, so I was *really* glad I’d brought Nina along.

We kept watch on them for a while, and the harpies on guard duty swapped with other harpies that came out from the hole. They must nest somewhere around there…

“Looks like we’ve pinned down a location,” I commented.

“These lookouts will be annoying’h.”

“Let’s head back for now.”

Quietly, so they didn’t notice us, we started back toward the town.

That evening, I addressed our group. “It looks like we were right—they have a nest right above the lake.”

“That’s where they are…” Lucy murmured, her eyes sharpening.

“I do have one piece of good news,” Fujiyan added. “Apparently, Sir Sakurai—or rather, the Soleil Knights—successfully killed the blight dragon.”

“Oh! I did think the guild seemed a bit lively. So that’s why,” said Lucy with a clap. She’d been spending a lot of her time at the guild, mostly gathering information and training.

“Well, that’s Sakurai for you,” I mused. “Not even a week and he’s done.”

But then, Fujiyan corrected me. “Well, it would appear that he is *not* ‘done.’”

“What do you mean, Boss’h?”

“There were three blight dragons.”

“What?!”

Wasn’t that more like *bad* news?

“Then the monsters must still be acting weird…” Lucy said, slumping. I guess she was disappointed that she hadn’t been able to go into the dungeon recently.

“When are we taking out the harpy queen, then?” Sasa asked, voice hard.

“I believe the safest option would be to wait until the blight dragons have all been defeated…” answered Fujiyan.

“When will that be?”

“I do not know…”

The Soleil Knights had taken out the first one quickly enough, but that didn’t mean the second would fall quite so easily.

Labyrinthos was huge, and there was no guarantee that the knights would win. Considering Sasa’s feelings, though, there was no way we could just kick our heels up until then.

“Let’s go for it in three days,” I announced. “I need to strengthen my elemental magic, and we need to wait until Lucy’s finished her training.”

“Lucy, can you get there in three days?” Aya asked.

“Aya, you look scary…” said Lucy. “All right! You can count on me.”

Nina glanced around at us. “I think it’s decided’h.”

“Three days,” I said definitively. “Then we’ll head for the harpy queen.”

◇

It was the eve of our battle, and I was dreaming. In front of me was a space containing nothing…the goddess’s room.

Feels like it’s been a while. I knelt down and put my hands together in prayer.

When she appeared, she was sucking on a Popsicle and fanning herself. On top of that, she was wearing a pretty sloppy outfit—a t-shirt and leggings. It was just a bit erotic…but that didn’t make her appearance any less untidy.

H-Hmm…she doesn’t look divine at all.

“Oh, you’re here?” she asked, fanning her chest as she turned toward me.

You could at least dress properly when you meet your believers…it ruins your good looks.

“I can hear that,” she commented.

“Your outfit’s all sloppy, Goddess.”

“Oh, how cheeky, you said it aloud. Perhaps you just aren’t devoted enough.”

“I pray every day.”

“Well, I know *that*.” She pouted.

That was enough playing around. “Thank you. It’s because of your help that I got to meet Sasa again.”

She chuckled, Popsicle still in her mouth as she replied. “You *should* be thankful. By the way, why aren’t you making friends with that hero boy?”

Huh?

“He’s a follower of one of the goddesses you hate,” I pointed out. “Should I really be making friends with him?”

“Don’t worry about all that. If you’re close, it’ll make him easier to use later, right?”

“Well, you…” I started without meaning to. She was always so cynical. “I don’t exactly want to *use* my classmates.” I was against it emotionally.

“Sakurai will be one of the key players on the continent. Quit your complaining and get in good with him. Remember, the last time you did what I said, you got to meet your friend again.”

“And I’m grateful for that…”

“Aya Sasaki is a good friend to have. She’s as tough as any hero. Lucy’s magic is getting much stronger too, so your party’s looking good.”

“Which makes me the weakest link.” Everyone *else* was stronger.

“Stats are for show,” the goddess replied. “You just need to be able to turn things around! Keep training your elemental magic.”

She’d been much more specific with her advice lately.

Then, I felt my hair get stroked, and some kind of strength seemed to flow into me. “Make sure you don’t lose to those songbirds,” she said.

Maybe she’d brought me here to offer some support.

“You can count on me, Goddess,” I bowed, and by the time I lifted my head, she’d vanished.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Challenges a Boss

“Right, let’s go then,” I said.

“Do we really need to head out so early?” Lucy grumbled with a sleepy look on her face.

It was two in the morning, and we were readying ourselves to leave for our fight with the harpy queen.

“I was sure we’d be going during the day’h,” Nina added.

“That would be far too naive, Lady Nina! It is a dog-eat-dog world out there, so we must grasp and exploit our nemeses’ weaknesses without mercy,” explained Fujiyan. “Harpies are avian monsters and their visual acuity drops at night.”

“Plus, they attacked us lamiae while we were sleeping. Turnabout’s fair play!” Sasa declared enthusiastically.

“The harpies will be sleeping at this time of night,” I said to Sasa, “so let’s lay them to rest for good.”

“Makoto, that sentiment is a bit scary,” Lucy stated.

I continued with our briefing. “Lucy and I will move in from outside the dungeon. Nina, Sasa, you wait at the lake. We’ll begin our attack two hours from now, at four in the morning. Fujiyan, you wait here for the good news and the loot from the harpy queen.”

“Indeed. Equip yourselves well and remember the items you need. Godspeed, my friends!”

We all nodded sharply before departing.

“The forests around here get really dark once the sun’s down. I don’t like it,” Lucy said, gripping tightly to my arm. I was using *Stealth* as we walked through the trees and underbrush.

The growls and buzzing noises of the animals and insects carried really well in the dark forest. This was also the time of night when many monsters were active.

“I’ve been back and forth along this route for three days now,” I told her, “so it’s pretty much just a stroll for me now.”

“Wasn’t that hard on you?” Lucy asked cautiously.

“Nah, it’s good fun.”

“Ah... Right...” She sighed, casting a look my way that implied I was a raving lunatic.

“What’s with the sigh?” The journey to the lair was part of getting ready to face a boss. You couldn’t drop your guard, and the trip was pretty enjoyable as well. The anticipation got me fired up!

“There’s so much mist that I can barely see. I don’t understand what you could possibly be enjoy—”

I interrupted her. “The mist is something I asked the elementals for. It’s a pretty good idea, right?”

“What? All of it?”

“Pretty much... Also, you’re being a bit loud,” I said, putting my hand over her mouth.

We moved forward quietly, but the trip was a long one, so it was also somewhat boring.

Oh yeah, I haven’t asked Fujiyan what he prefers in a girl yet. Guess I should invite him out for a drink once we’re done with the battle!

Hey, came the goddess’s voice, quit it with the flags.

Well, that was rude, Goddess. I was being careful...

“Say, Makoto,” Lucy said after a while, “you remember when I went out with Aya the other day?”

“Yeah, did you get along all right?”

Actually, I wonder what they talked about.

“Mostly. Lamiae apparently eat some pretty bad food, so she loved the stuff at the cafe and such.”

“Right, I guess she’d been eating just raw fish and fruits.” When I’d learned about what her diet had consisted of in the dungeon, I’d felt a wave of sympathy.

“She mentioned wanting something sweet, but there’s no shop in town that really serves that kind of thing.”

“Oh, yeah. Fujiyan promised he’d get a hold of some chocolate though,” I said. “What else did you talk about?”

She didn’t answer immediately.

Uh? Did you two only chat about food?

“We also...talked about what you were like in your old world,” she said eventually.

“You mean how I was just a loner that liked games?”

I doubt Aya would have said anything too weird.

“And I told her about what you’ve been like in Macallan.”

Hang on... “Why were you just talking about me...?”

“Well, that’s what Aya wanted to know. And I wanted to know what you used to be like.”

“Um, all right then...” It was a little embarrassing. But...also kind of exciting?

As we chatted, we reached our destination.

“We’re pretty close now. Lucy, you wait here.”

“Right,” she said. “You’re taking down the lookouts, yeah?”

“I am.” As I spoke, I set *Calm Mind* to 99%.

The thick mist reduced visibility to almost nothing, but *Scouting* kept track of the harpies’ positions. Obviously, I kept *Stealth* active the whole time as well. They didn’t notice me as I took silent steps, then attacked.

There were three harpies in total: one atop a large boulder, another on a low tree branch, and the third was near the hole that led into Labyrinthos. I

slashed each one across the throat and stabbed through each heart for good measure. Using my water magic, I controlled the flow of blood spurts, directing them away from me.

With those harpies dead, we'd now have a little breathing room until the guard changed.

"Lucy, I'm done," I told her.

"It hasn't even been five minutes... You'd make a good assassin."

"That is not my job," I said defensively. I might have skills suited for an assassin, but I wasn't going to become one. Officially, at least. Although, despite my protests, I thought that playing as an assassin was great fun!

And so, we approached the hole to Labyrinthos, then quietly peered inside.

Within the dungeon, we saw a massive nest-looking structure made from trees and ivy that clung to the ceiling.

The harpies' nest.

"Lucy, you're up."

"Got it. This is for Aya, so I'll serve up an extra-large helping!"

Then, she began to chant. Thanks to the giant's blessing on her staff, she could summon a single *Stone Shot* without an incantation. However, this time, she was summoning multiple, so she had to incant. Boulder after boulder appeared in the air around us as she murmured the words of the spell.

"Burn with fire, *Imbue Flame*." The massive boulders began to glow brightly, and they lit up the area like the setting sun.

"Lucy! They've noticed!" Several harpies were peering up at us from the nest.

It's too late! Go, Lucy!

"Meteo Rain!"

Lucy swung her staff and the burning boulders of various sizes blew away the harpies' nest, caving in the whole ceiling in the process.

◇ In the Harpies' Nest ◇

Something's outside, one of the harpies thought. What are the lookouts doing?

Harpies were monsters, but they were also highly intelligent beings that acted as a collective, utilizing significant self-preservation skills.

A harpy near the entrance had immediately noticed something unusual, and they looked out, only to gasp in shock.

The light outside of the dungeon looked bright enough to be the coming dawn. But by the time the harpy realized that it was a magic attack on the nest, the spell had already struck.

Their home was mercilessly destroyed. Fire licked at the nest as several harpies were crushed by the falling ceiling.

However, some of them avoided such a fate—nothing could strike them down if they could flee to the sky!

Suddenly, the flying harpies were swallowed by water.

What?! the harpies thought in unison. They couldn't swim well and usually would avoid even attempting it.

Wh-What's going on?! was the next thought of the collective.

But regardless, they fell, unable to calmly understand the situation before they struck the lake beneath them.

◇ Aya Sasaki's Perspective ◇

"Miss Sasaki!" Nina yelled.

"Nina! Looks like they managed it!"

We'd been hiding behind a waterfall by the lake, but then, we heard a roar as the ceiling collapsed. The harpies' filthy nest fell alongside its occupants, and all of it was engulfed in a huge amount of water.

"Miss Lucy's Meteo Rain and Mister Takatsuki's ultra rank *Tianlong* are a rather vicious combination."

"There are sea serpents and king crocodiles in the lake," I said. "They should feed on the harpies."

"Looks like they're attacking right away'h."

The harpies tried to splash their way out of the water, but the aquatic monsters had the upper hand. Every so often, one or two harpies would escape the lake, and Nina or I would send them flying back into the water with a yell.

One by one, the harpies screeched as they were dragged beneath the water.

This is for my family! None of you are getting away!

"Looks like there are none left," I said eventually, breathing heavily.

"Now we just need to find out where the queen went'h..."

We searched around the cave, but there was no sign of her. Did she get away? *Damn! We were so close!*

"Heeeyyy, Sasa, Nina!"

Takatsuki and Lucy drifted down from the ceiling after a while. They had small umbrella-like things in their hands. Apparently, these were called Parachutes and, when opened, their enchantment made the user float down gently, even from high places.

Fujiwara had all sorts of useful items.

"How'd it go?" Makoto asked. "Did you take down the harpy queen?"

"Not yet. We're not sure if she fell with the rest'h."

"Makoto, is your *Scouting* skill picking anything up?" I asked.

"There are too many monsters around," he replied. "I can't tell them apart."

Where is she? The noisy dungeon had gone oddly silent and there were no harpies in sight. We must've gotten them all.

"They didn't put up much of a fight," Lucy commented. "Let's head back and have a drink." Her mood had already shifted to celebration, but Takatsuki and Nina soon brought her back down to earth.

"Lucy, that's taunting Murphy's Law."

"You cannot let your guard down yet, Miss Lucy'h."

Honestly, though, I felt somewhat giddy with victory as well. We'd wiped out the harpies! It'd been a force that I couldn't have defeated alone!

We did it! Mother, sisters!

Then, I heard a faint singing, so quiet I almost missed it.

It was…pleasant. And completely out of place within the dungeon.

I decided to ask the others. "Uh? Can you all hear something?"

"I'm not sure'h… I think so, though'h."

"It's quiet. I can't really make it out."

We glanced around at one another—

"So here you are…"

—then all turned as one.

The harpy queen.

She had a beautiful face and pretty, light-brown wings. The singing did not stop as she spoke. Clever girl.

"Impossible! *Siren Song*'h?!" Nina shouted in a panic.

"Uh, she's the *harpy* queen, right?" I asked. "Why can she use siren skills?"

"She must have gotten the skill after evolving'h! That voice will enthrall any man who hears it. Mister Takatsuki, you mustn't listen'h!"

Too late. Takatsuki was staring blankly at the harpy queen.

It doesn't matter! I'll kill her before she can do anything! I thought, moving toward her.

"Would you be happy to see your mage boy die?" asked the harpy queen with a grin. "Mage boy! Put your dagger to your neck."

Takatsuki did exactly what the voice instructed.

"Damn it'h!" Nina yelled.

"M-Makoto," Lucy whimpered, panicking, as she held her staff in both hands.

“My voice is particularly effective on human men,” the harpy queen chuckled. “Your luck ran out the moment you brought him along with you.”

“*Siren Song* charms men’h. The people that attacked your family must have been controlled by her as well’h,” Nina spat through clenched teeth.

“Oh, I wondered who you were. So you’re the lamia girl I thought I killed…apparently not, though.” The harpy queen glared hatefully at me, and I glared murderously back.

“Your family’s all dead!” I yelled. “Look at what you get!”

Her answer was nothing short of mocking. “As long as I survive, I can bring them back as many times as I wish. What a shame for you.”

Damn it! She’s right.

It’d been the end for us lamiae once she’d killed Mother.

“Not one more step,” the harpy queen warned. “Human boy, come slowly toward me. If your friends attack, slit your throat.”

Takatsuki nodded in obedience to the voice.

“N-No…” Lucy cried.

Nina remained silent, not moving, but looking for a chance.

What should we do…? She had Takatsuki as a hostage, so we needed to be careful. I was looking between him and the harpy queen, but then I noticed something.

Takatsuki? I thought to myself. *Siren Song* should have enthralled him completely, but he was looking straight at me. His eyes looked clear as if he wasn’t under her spell at all.

Is she not actually controlling him?

He kept looking in our direction as he approached the harpy queen. I saw an urging in his eyes.

All right!

I focused my strength in my right hand, using a skill from the *Action Game Player* skill tree, one that I used to subconsciously use: *Charged Attack*.

Of course, though, I had to wait for the right moment. If I attacked her now, she might get away…

“You girls stay where you are,” ordered the harpy queen. “You’re lucky—if my children were here, I’d feed you to them. But alas, I’ll just take the human boy instead.”

I kept my faith in Takatsuki while continuing to gather my strength.

It’d be fine. It had to be.

“Human men are such fools,” she continued. “The moment they hear my singing, I become like a goddess to them. They’re ready to kneel before me as soon as we meet.”

The look of triumph on her face was pissing me off.

“Come on, lick the feet of your goddess,” she said, sticking one clawed foot out in front of Takatsuki.

She must have been getting carried away… I hated to admit it, but she was beautiful enough that I could easily imagine her charming men.

“Sh-She’s making Makoto lick her feet… I’m so jeal— I mean, that’s awful!”

“Ummm, Miss Lucy’h?” Nina prodded verbally.

I’d have to talk to Lucy about what she’d said later…

Takatsuki leaned over slowly, bringing his face closer to her feet. “Such filthy talons could never belong to a goddess,” he told her quietly, in his usual tone.

“Wha?” the harpy queen managed before he soundlessly cut off her foot.

“Gyaaaaahhhhh!”

As she screamed, magic icicles appeared in midair and stabbed into her eyes. Did Takatsuki cut off her foot and cast the spell simultaneously?

Whoa! I didn’t even see him move!

“Sasa! Now!” Takatsuki yelled.

He’s right! It’s now or never!

I *Dash*ed forward and kept my speed up, driving my charged fist into the harpy queen’s body.

“Gah!” My fist went straight through her, blowing a hole in her body. “D-Damn…you!”

Somehow, she still had the breath to curse us.

The talons of her remaining foot lurched up to slice into me.

Shing.

In an instant, Takatsuki’s dagger cut straight through her neck.

The rest of us cried out in shock as the corpse fell to the ground.

Isn’t that blade a bit too sharp?

“Th-Thank you,” I said to him.

“There’s your revenge, Sasa.”

As I heard the words, I felt a tension within me unwind. I stumbled over toward him.

Ah…I’m covered in blood.

Disregarding my attempt to move away, he caught me. I almost felt like crying from the soft hold he had on me.

“Well done, Sasa,” he told me.

“Thanks…”

I got revenge for you all, I thought, sending the words to my deceased family.

My head fell onto his shoulder and I closed my eyes. It was the most comforting warmth I’d ever felt from another person.

The splinters shattering my heart had all been taken away.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Why…didn’t my…charm work?” the head of the harpy queen asked painfully.

Uh? She can still talk? Actually, she’s still alive?

“The hell…” Lucy said, recoiling. “How are you alive? That’s creepy.”

I quite agreed, actually.

I’m gonna have dreams about this, so stop talking as a decapitated head.

“Where is she… Where is my sister?” Sasa asked the head.

It was a pretty surreal sight, but the question was serious so I kept quiet.

“I don’t know…she vanished…once she opened the entrance…”

Sasa took a moment, then quietly replied, “I see…”

Right, I guess there was someone else that needed a dose of revenge.

Forget all that, what do we do with this head?

“Monsters have astonishing levels of vitality if they live for centuries. Their strength comes from their heart, though. Separate the head and body and she’ll die soon enough’h,” Nina explained, putting my fears to rest somewhat.

“Takatsuki, why couldn’t she control you?” Sasa asked.

“I want to know that too’h!” Nina joined in.

Lucy was poking the harpy queen’s head with the end of her staff. *Quit iiiit.*

“Because of *Calm Mind*, skills like charm magic have a hard time affecting me.”

“Hmm, I’ve heard that mental stability skills make resisting charm and illusion magic easier’h… But they don’t make you immune, just more resilient’h…” Nina tilted her head at me. “*Siren Song* having no effect at all is strange’h.”

“Still, Takatsuki’s acting allowed me to get revenge!” Sasa said, hugging me again.

This is getting pretty embarrassing… Could you let go already?

“Aya, get off him,” Lucy said, walking toward us. She must have gotten bored of poking the head.

“No wayyy,” Aya replied as Lucy tried to pull her off.

It was cute, kind of like siblings playing around. I’d rather they didn’t drag me into it though.

“Oh, have you ever seen a goddess, Mister Takatsuki’h?”

“Right? The way you spoke to the harpy queen, it sounded like you had,” Lucy added.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “I see her in my dreams sometimes. We spoke yesterday too.”

“Oooh! I can understand why *Siren Song* didn’t work if you’ve seen a real goddess’h!”

I guess that made sense?

“Takatsuuuki, what’s a goddess?” Sasa asked.

Right, I haven’t explained yet, have I?

“Makoto follows a wicked deity. She’s really beautiful too.”

Don’t be so free with the wicked bit!

“I mean, she *is* really pretty…” I said. “She’s constantly trying to tempt me too, so I’m not entirely sure how to react.”

“Y-Your goddess is trying to tempt you’h?!”

“She was very casually dressed yesterday, and she was all over me…” The memory made my heart start racing more than just a bit, so I’d really appreciate it if, in the future, she wouldn’t do that.

“Uh… Is this goddess a bit of a slut maybe?”

Lucy! You can’t say that! But…she wasn’t, right?

I heard Noah’s words in my mind as she chimed in to defend herself. *Hey, I’m a* maiden *goddess!*

“She says she’s a maiden.” I relayed dutifully for the sake of her reputation.

“But she’s saying that herself, so it doesn’t feel right… It’s like those girls that always say, ‘It’s my first time,’ I think…”

You can’t say things like that, Sasa. Some real hidden depths getting exposed here, huh?

“E-Everyone, you shouldn’t insult a goddess unless you want to be smote’h,” Nina warned before turning to look at the head of the harpy queen. “Oh, looks like she finally died’h.”

The monster had passed away while we were having our ridiculous conversation. Well, whatever.

“What should we take back with us? What’re the most valuable materials?” Sasa asked.

“The wings would probably be useful, but when monsters live for so long, the heart becomes the most valuable part’h.”

“Oh, this?” Sasa said, ripping the heart from the corpse without hesitation. Gross…

“There should be magicite inside of it’h.”

“Hmmm, this bit?”

She pulled out a piece of magicite, and it sat in her hand, glowing orange.

“That’s a great size! It should sell for a good sum’h.”

“There’s another one,” Sasa added.

“What?”

She dug out another piece of the same size, which glowed purple.

“It feels sorta relaxing, holding this…” Sasa mused as she stared at it.

Nina examined it closely as well. “That…was probably from the lamia queen’h…”

“What?!” Sasa exclaimed. “It was?”

Oh, I guess it’s like an heirloom from her mother.

“You should have it,” Lucy said.

“Right, it’s yours,” I agreed.

“Uh, but—”

“I’m sure the boss would say the same’h.”

“Thank you…all of you.”

Sasa cradled it carefully in front of her chest.

I was glad, really glad, that we’d gotten revenge for her.

“Right, let’s head back,” I said after a few minutes.

“Are we going through that hole again?” Lucy complained.

“Well there’s no other way out.”

“Calm down, all of you, we managed to wi—Wait, everyone, quiet’h!”

“Someone’s coming.”

Nina’s eyes had sharpened, and at the same time, Lucy readied her staff. Straight after, my *Scouting* reacted as well.

“It looks like there’s a group of monsters and humans fighting,” Sasa said, pointing. I followed her finger and saw a group of about twenty being attacked by monsters.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“It’s up to you!” Lucy cheered.

Sasa and Nina both looked expectantly at me as well. I guess *I* would be the one deciding then. “I’ve got a few uses left of my elemental magic, so let’s help them out.” I’d spent the whole week training but hadn’t had much chance to use it. “Elementals, hi there, would you give me a hand? *Water Magic: Water Whale*.”

The huge form of a whale appeared, made entirely of water, and it swam through the air above the lake. It swallowed up roughly twenty people before sending the monsters flying with a swish of its tail. The whale then made its way back over to us.

Lucy and Sasa both let out cries and grabbed onto me as the vast quantity of water ferried the people to us.

“Mister Takatsuki, you can definitely control water way more precisely now’h…” Nina said to me in shock.

“Oh, they’re the Soleil Knights, aren’t they?” Lucy asked.

“They are,” I answered.

I spied Althena’s crest on their chest armor. Maybe *he’s* here too?

“Are you all right?!” So called the Hero of Light as he immediately jumped up.

“Hey, Sakurai,” I greeted.

“T-Takatsuki? Was that you? That was some crazy magic!”

“Ah, yeah, well… I guess…” I cast around. I wasn’t sure I could really take the credit since it was the elementals’ magic, after all.

“Ryousuke! Are you all right? Hey! Where’d you come from?” This demand came from the person that appeared next—our former classmate, Saki Yokoyama.

“Saki?” Sasa asked.

“Wait, is that you, Aya?” she asked in disbelief. “You’re alive?!”

“It’s been a while, Saki!”

“You look kinda different…?”

“A lot’s happened,” Sasa stated simply.

“Oh, well you need to tell me all about it!”

“Sure!”

The former high school girls started chattering away. I guess the two of them used to be pretty close.

“Thank you for saving us all,” Sakurai said to me.

“You’re welcome. So, what happened?”

The Soleil Knights should all be elite fighters, so I couldn’t imagine that monsters on this level of Labyrinthos would pose much of a threat to them.

“Ah, well we came across the blight dragons further down, but...”

Apparently, the two remaining dragons were working together—the pair were exceptionally formidable opponents.

The knights had tried to separate them but had then been attacked by other monsters from that level. When the blight dragons struck again, the knights were at a disadvantage and so the whole party had needed to retreat.

We’d come across them just after they’d managed to escape from the lower level.

“I’m glad we haven’t lost anyone, but the battle’s been a failure...” Sakurai’s expression was glum.

“The White Grandsage is here as our overseer, so maybe if she’d actually helped us...” As Yokoyama spoke, her expression twisted in unhappiness.

“She’s here just in case we fail. We can’t ask for more,” Sakurai responded calmly.

“What?!” Lucy cried out in surprise. “The White Grandsage is here?!”

“Hey, Lucy, is that White Grandsage the one who’s called the strongest on the continent?”

“Yeah! She’s pretty much what all mages aspire to be!”

That was something I’d learned in the temple; Highland’s White Grandsage was the pinnacle of what it meant to be a mage.

While Lucy and I were getting excited, Sakurai’s expression seemed much grimmer.

Right, he’s in a pretty crappy position...

Sakurai turned to address Yokoyama. “There’s nothing we can do there, Saki. We were told to deal with the blight dragons.”

“But if we report that we’ve failed, then the prince’s faction...”

“Failure would cause no small amount of trouble for Princess Noelle.”

I had no idea about the exact circumstances, but it sounded like they were in quite the pickle.

If I follow the goddess’s instructions...

```
Will you help the Hero of Light?
▶Yes
No
```

I was her only believer, so I should listen to her requests at least.

“Do you want a hand, Sakurai?” I asked. I spoke to him first, rather than just responding to him.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Fights alongside the Hero of Light

◇ Saki Yokoyama's Perspective ◇

"Do you want a hand, Sakurai?"

It took me a while to realize that the weak mage alongside Aya was my old classmate, Takatsuki.

I, Saki Yokoyama, had the skill *Sacred Swordfighter*. This meant I could use holy blades and coat myself in light, so weak magic would be unable to harm me.

My power had let me become the Hero of Light's—that is, Ryousuke's—adjutant. I also had another skill: *Mana Vision*.

Mana was the source of strength in this world, and I could see it. This skill was the reason we'd overcome many of the dangers we'd faced so far, like monsters pretending to be weak or assassins playing the normal person.

They could change their shape however they wanted, but they couldn't hide their mana. And when I looked at Takatsuki's mana, I could only describe it as weak.

He didn't seem to have gotten stronger at all, even since I last saw him in the temple. He'd possessed the least mana out of anyone there, so I was sure he'd blown off his training ever since. He'd never studied at school either but had just played video games.

Ryousuke had put in the effort *because* he'd gotten such amazing power in this world. But what help could Takatsuki be, if he hadn't put any work into developing his skills? He always just played around!

When I opened my mouth, I was just the slightest bit irritated with him. "Takatsuki, if *you're* offering a hand, then—"

"Do you have any good ideas?" Ryousuke asked him, talking over me.

What? We're actually relying on him?

"Sorta. I won't know unless I give it a go, though," Takatsuki answered.

"Well, we're outta options here, so I'm all ears."

What... Takatsuki's not going to be any help at all.

Although, maybe we should ask the red-headed mage next to him? *She* has loads of mana. More than I'd seen even in the kingdom.

"Okay then," Takatsuki said. "Lucy, Nina, you two wait here. Sasa, mind guiding us?"

"Sure thing."

Or not, if Aya was the only other one coming with us.

"Will you be all right, Mister Takatsuki'h?"

"Be careful, Makoto."

The two girls in Takatsuki's party sounded worried. Makes sense. I mean, it goes without saying, but he was pretty weak.

“I’ll take it easy,” he said breezily.

Well, that was fine, but he obviously didn’t know the true terror waiting below. He’d probably be on his knees as soon as he saw the blight dragons.

There were four of us going. Me, Ryousuke, Aya, and Takatsuki.

Could those two even use flight magic?

Takatsuki couldn’t. Instead, he used some weird spell to move across the water. Seriously, anyone above mid rank could fly...

“Yay! We’re faster than the sea serpents.” Aya looked like she was having fun, at least.

We followed her directions for a while, proceeding deeper into the dungeon.

“Is this the place, Sasa?”

“Yup, we need to go to the lower layer, just past here,” Aya answered. “I was always told to never go deeper.”

She knew more about the dungeon’s layout than I’d expected. Maybe she was an adventurer?

We were standing on a small island toward the edge of the lake. Under the water in front of us, the mouth of a huge cave was visible. The dungeon layer we were currently on had lightstone embedded in the walls, which lit the place up and made it look almost magical; however, the inside of that cave was pitch-black.

“The blight dragons are at the end of that cave, but none of us are used to fighting in the water...” Ryousuke explained regretfully. We’d all done our best though, especially considering we were all novices.

It wasn’t our fault; it was the fault of the prince’s faction for denying us support, along with that Grandsage for not even lifting a finger.

And now we were relying on some apprentice mage like Takatsuki...

“So, think you can help?” Ryousuke asked. I didn’t think his hopes would be answered, honestly...

As expected, Takatsuki crossed his arms and just frowned at the lake.

See? I knew it... There’s nothing he can do...

“All right, so here’s a purely hypothetical question: would they be easier to fight if we could get them out of the water and the dungeon?”

“You can do that?!” Ryousuke asked. “If we were outside, then I could use the full strength of the *Hero of Light* skill. If we fight in the sun, we can definitely win.”

“All right, then. Let’s fetch them out.”

As if you can even make that happen...

Takatsuki started speaking cheerily. “Give me a minute, I’m going to speak to the elementals. There are a lot of them ’round here.”

“There are?” Aya asked, her head swiveling.

“You can see elementals?” Ryousuke asked. “That’s amazing.”

Elementals? I couldn’t see anything, and I had *Mana Vision*. I’m sure he’s just talking himself up.

Ryousuke seemed pretty upfront though, so I think he believed it. However, I hadn't seen any elementals, not even in Highland.

"Hey, elementals, you good?" Takatsuki said to no one in particular.

What was that supposed to be? Is *that* how he asked for help from the elementals?

"Yeah, we're having a bit of trouble with them…" he said, again, to empty air. "They're a real pain."

No, you're the pain, I thought.

"Thanks, that'd be great."

Does anything he says have any meaning to it…?

"We're counting on you then," he said with finality.

The moment the words left his lips… An immense feeling pressed down on me. That's what it felt like, along with the sensation of the entire dungeon shaking.

But that was impossible.

It was overwhelming; I couldn't breathe.

Wh-What? What's going on?

"Saki, are you okay?" Aya asked.

I was in complete panic.

Everything was bright white, so I couldn't see anything.

When I realized that what I was seeing was an immense flood of mana, a chill ran down my back.

What the hell?! Mana? All of it?! That amount isn't controllable! We're gonna die!

"Incredible. All this is from the elementals?"

Even Ryousuke could feel it!

We needed to stop.

"Yeah, I've never seen so many of them turn up, though," Takatsuki commented. His own mana was as pitiful as ever.

However, he was in the center of the whirlpool of elemental mana.

I don't care how crap of a mage you are, you should be on your knees with that much mana! But…

Is it getting calmer around him?

It was like he was the eye of the storm, the center of this world.

"Right then, I'll start casting. It's gonna be hard to control, so you guys should back off."

Wh-What was that?!

No human could control this much mana.

"Saki, let's leave it to him." There was a look of trust and hope in Ryousuke's eyes.

Why?! He never looked at anyone like that.

"What about me?" Aya asked.

"Hmm, you wait with them," Takatsuki instructed.

"Aww, I wanted to see it up close!"

Are you mad?! Aya, you need to get away from him! You'll get caught up in his magic!

The three of us backed off and just watched him.

C-Can he really control all of that…?

I could barely see his face in the distance, but he seemed excited, and his expression was the same as someone on the verge of pulling a prank.

"Right then, elementals. Water Magic: Yamata no Orochi."

With those words, a monster was born.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

I'd spent a week getting along with the elementals here, and I put all of that effort into the spell.

This was king rank water magic—Yamata no Orochi.

A huge serpent made of water appeared, rearing eight heads. Anyone might've mistaken it for a mountain.

I turned around. Ryousuke looked excited, Sasa's eyes were sparkling, and Yokoyama had fallen to her knees.

"Yay! Takatsuki, that's a snake!" Sasa was a lamia, so I guess she felt some kinship with it.

Yeah…she's gotten pretty weird.

"Elementals, there's two *gross things* down there. Would you throw them out of the dungeon for me?"

The water serpent hissed out a roar before splashing into the cave, throwing sheets of water and massive waves as it went.

I could tell that king rank magic was massively strong, even though this was the first time I'd used it.

I'd heard ultra rank magic could create things that were almost living, but the *Orochi* actually *felt* alive. It was terrifying. Lucy had king rank magic as a skill, so did that mean she'd be able to use fire magic like this? She would wipe out the whole party if she butterfingered…

As I considered that, Ryousuke came up and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Takatsuki, that's so cool!" He was in pretty high spirits.

"I just hope it works on the dragons," I replied.

"Was that king rank?"

"Yeah. I think it went pretty well for a first attempt."

"Wha… Uh… K-King rank?" Yokoyama sputtered.

Sasa was bracing Yokoyama, and asked her, "Saki, can you stand?"

"Sasa," I said, "can I get you to take Yokoyama and meet up with the others?"

"Sure, but what about you?"

"I need to keep control of the spell until the blight dragons are out of the dungeon."

"What should I do?" Ryousuke asked.

Whoa, where's all this coming from, Mr. Hero? "Once they're out, you can do what you want."

"G-Got it."

While the water magic was king rank and looked pretty flashy, it was still pretty weak and probably wouldn't kill the dragons.

"T-Takatsuki!" Yokoyama called suddenly.

"What's up?"

"B-Behind you!"

There was another huge splash as *Orochi* slid back up to the surface. A horrible screech echoed around the dungeon, making my hair feel like it was standing on end.

"That's...them?" Sasa asked numbly.

Both blight dragons were writhing within the body of *Yamata no Orochi*.

One of them was like a smooth white earthworm, not exactly something I'd call a dragon. Its body was covered in countless gaping mouths, and those mouths were the source of the disgusting noise. The other one had eyes rolling all over its body, constantly moving.

Neither of them was anything like I'd imagined.

Blight dragon or evil dragon, whichever you called it... I'd have thought up something more menacing. Honestly, these were...

"Eww, they're gross!" Sasa yelled.

"Yup," I agreed. Blight dragons, more like gross dragons.

One of them kept up its ghastly shriek as my serpent carried it away. The sound was like nails on a chalkboard and it set my teeth on edge.

"Right, let's go, Sakurai."

"Y-Yeah..."

The dragons were winding around within *Orochi*, trying to escape. I kept control of the water to make sure they couldn't.

"How are we getting them outside?" he asked.

"There's a hole in the ceiling—we'll take them up there and chuck them out."

That ghastly screaming was still carrying on, making goosebumps appear up my arms. I guess the screech was from the mouthy one.

"The blight dragon has an effect that makes you uneasy. Are you all right?" asked Sakurai. "Our mages couldn't use magic when they heard it."

"Oh..." It *was* a bit unsettling, but I could still use my magic. Must be because of the *Calm Mind* skill. "I think I'll be fine."

"Our high rank mages were wiped out," he said back, carrying something between a smile and a grimace on his face.

"So, about the one trying to get an eyeful... Does it do something as well?"

"Yeah, meeting any of its eyes induces fear. You good?"

Calm Mind seemed to be dealing with both of those effects. "Yeah, I'm all okay. What about you?"

"I have divine protection from the sun goddess, so stat debuffs don't affect me."

I had no words, but he didn't notice my subdued look. What a cheater he was...

He hasn't changed at all, I thought with a sigh.

The blight dragons were still raging, the scream unending. Sakurai was looking excitedly at the dragons twining through the king rank *Yamata no Orochi*.

"There are almost no king rank mages, even in Highland," he said. "I definitely haven't seen king rank *water* magic before."

"It took me seven days to be able to use this spell even once, and I can't use it without the elementals' help," I explained. "It's pretty inefficient."

"I don't mean the casting itself—there aren't many mages who could keep it under perfect control like this."

That was high praise indeed. This isn't a praise economy though, it won't get you anything.

"I can see the opening," Aya eventually said.

Sunlight was streaming in from the hole in the ceiling. It was already dawn.

"I'm glad Lucy opened up that massive hole with Meteo Rain."

Sakurai seemed confused. "Takatsuki, what was that you said?"

"Nothing, just talking to myself."

Okay, the final move!

"Sakurai, I'll throw them out. My spell will fade once it leaves the dungeon, so I can't do this again."

"You didn't say anything about that!" he yelled.

Whoops, maybe I should've mentioned that first...

"You'll be fine," I told him with a grin.

"Guh, fine. Leave it to me!" he said, his face firming in conviction.

"Elementals, we're going up there," I said, before climbing onto *Yamata no Orochi's* head.

As I approached, my gaze locked with that of the eye-covered blight dragon.

Urgh, it's even creepier up close... Let's finish this up quick.

"Water Magic: Tianlong."

The eight-headed *Orochi* beneath me suddenly morphed into a massive dragon. It wrapped around the two of its blighted brethren and flew off toward the massive hole in the ceiling.

Thank you...elementals.

As soon as we left the dungeon, the elemental magic lost its power and vanished—the blight dragons and I were flung into the sky.

Is Sakurai following us? I wondered.

Suddenly, I saw him, glowing gold.

Is he absorbing the sunlight? The aura around him was getting brighter and brighter.

That must be his *Hero of Light* skill. Since I now had the chance, I wanted to take a proper look.

Sakurai, the rest's up to you.

◇ Ryousuke Sakurai's Perspective ◇

Whoa! He actually did it!

I'd had no idea how to deal with the blight dragons when they'd been hidden away in the dungeon, but thanks to Takatsuki's magic, they were now high in the air. Takatsuki had been thrown up alongside them.

Suddenly, I had a thought.

Damn, he can't fly!

I looked frantically over to him, but he was floating gently down with some umbrella-like thing in his hand. *Phew, he's got some sort of magic item.*

He gave me a gesture that indicated he was trusting the rest to me.

All right! It's my job now!

The two blight dragons were my enemies. I readied my holy sword and began concentrating on the yellow holy aura associated with the *Hero of Light* skill. Once activated, I transferred the aura to my sword, Aroundight, which had been given to me by Highland.

Takatsuki's water dragon had dispersed and was gone; the blight dragons were now free, their ugliness on full display.

I can't hold back here—full power!

I put both hands on my sword's hilt and swung it.

"Oh goddess of the sun, I pray for victory."

Flash, Sword of Light.

Brightness erupted from the holy sword, and the light sliced a cross pattern into the dragons' flesh. One of the blight dragons burst open.

All right!

The other one must have decided that it couldn't take that attack, and so it started to escape.

Obviously, I wasn't going to *let* it! It was fast, though. Also...

Is it heading for the town?

Damn it! I gave chase, but I wasn't catching up at all. The town below was in uproar at the unfamiliar sight.

Is it going to use its breath?!

I couldn't let that happen. A blight dragon's breath wasn't just an attack—it also spread curses. If the breath struck, the whole town would become uninhabitable! However, if I attacked using my full power, the town would be caught in the crossfire.

What should I...?

I glanced at Takatsuki and saw him looking expectantly on, his own hands up in surrender.

Right...he'd done the best he could for me, and I couldn't ask for any more.

Resigning myself to also damaging the town, I readied my sword of light.

Suddenly, the blight dragon slammed into a transparent wall, which caused a *shinging* noise to ring out as if something was shattering. The beast looked around in confusion.

Was that...a barrier? It looks multi-layered as well...

There was only one mage I could think of who was capable of that. I could see a white-robed figure standing in the air above the huge tent at the center of our garrison.

The Grandsage! She must have cast it!

I can do this! I readied my sword and swung.

Flash, Sword of Light.

The second blight dragon didn't even have time to shriek before it was sliced apart.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"Listen up, you lot! We're here to celebrate the wondrous defeat of the blight dragons at the hands of the Hero of Light!"

The Hero's Tavern was a lot more packed than usual.

"Highland will foot the bill for tonight. Everyone give your thanks to Princess Noelle!"

The adventurers bellowed out a cheer. A good portion of the sprawling tavern was dedicated wholly to the most important of the Soleil Knights.

I could see Sakurai and Yokoyama there. I guess they *did* play the lead role today.

"Long live the Hero of Light!"

"Long live the Soleil Knights!"

“Sir Sakurai, look this wayyy!”

“Hold me!”

“He’s so dreamy!”

High-pitched shrieks were blanketing the area.

“Such a commotion,” Fujiyan commented.

“Let’s just have our own party’h,” added Nina.

We were sitting around a table that the two of them had prepared, which was loaded up with a whole bunch of food and drink.

Once Sakurai had killed the two dragons, I’d met up with Lucy and Sasa. Lucy had started asking questions right away about the king rank magic I’d used, and she had some mumblings about her identity.

Well, even if she possessed the skill, she couldn’t use it.

Many of the knights had been injured, but thanks to the guild’s help, they’d managed to get out of the dungeon. After the death of the blight dragons, the monsters in Labyrinthos had calmed down, and the town was once more at peace.

All of that had led us to our current feast.

“By the way, who was the guy speaking?” He wasn’t from the guild, and he didn’t look like a merchant either.

“He’s a noble from Highland’h,” Nina told me. “The prime minister’s aide, right, Boss’h?”

“Indeed. He was here as a delegate from the prince’s faction and would have reported to the country if Sir Sakurai had failed but has instead found himself in this role.” Fujiyan snickered.

Man, he knows everything.

“But Makoto helped, right?” Lucy asked. “It’s kinda irritating to see them take all the credit.”

“That will not happen since Sir Sakurai conveyed our esteemed Tackie’s exploits to the guild. I would wager that they will soon be in contact.”

“For real, how do you hear all this information so quickly?” I prodded as I lifted my ale. “Anyway, this party’s not for me.”

I tapped my former classmate on the shoulder as she packed away the meal in front of her. Sasa turned as she took a bite from a chunk of meat on the bone, holding a glass of wine in her hand.

She eats and drinks so much, and yet she’s tiny.

“Sasa, congratulations on taking down the harpy queen.”

“Thanks. I’m grateful to all of you…particularly you, Takatsuki.”

“It wasn’t just me,” I said.

“But, if I hadn’t met you in the dungeon, then…then…” Sasa tightened her grip around my arm and waist as she spoke. She’d been way more touchy-feely lately. Maybe it’s what lamiae are like? Or maybe she was just drunk?

“Hey! You’re too close!” Lucy shouted.

“Not really, we’ve always been like this. Right, Takatsuki?”

Have we?

“H-Hm, always...” Lucy murmured. “By the way, Sasa, what are you planning now?”

“Oh yeah, that traitor sister of yours is still around somewhere, right?” I asked. If Sasa was planning on searching the dungeon, we’d help her.

“She is, but I doubt she’s around here anymore. It would be difficult for a single lamia to survive in Labyrinthos.”

Sasa thought there were too many adventurers on the upper level, and further down, it was too hard for a single lamia to eke out survival. The traitor must’ve fled elsewhere.

“You’re going back to that town called Macallan, right?” she asked. “Can I come with you?”

“Of course yo—”

“Obviously! We’re a party!” Lucy shouted over me. How manly.

“Good to have you, Sasa.”

“My eshteeeemed Tackie, I would likewise join shaid party,” Fujiyan added with a distinct slur in his voice.

“Boss, Boss’h. I think you’ve had a bit much to drink’h.”

From what I’d heard from Nina, Fujiyan had been worried while waiting for us on his own.

“Come on, Fujiyan, we’re partners!” I told him.

“Oh! Partners! I liiike the sound of that!”

“The pair of you haven’t changed at all,” Sasa said with a bemused laugh.

“Oh yeah, Makoto. How did the Hero of Light defeat them?” Lucy asked. “You were right up close after all.”

“I was. I saw his sword light up, and then the dragons were a mess.”

“That’s not enough detail...” she complained.

It’d been over so fast though, and I hadn’t seen anything else.

“This pasta’s great,” Sasa remarked.

“M-Miss Sasaki. That’s one of the bigger plates meant for sharing’h.”

We’d just gotten into the swing of celebrating when the big shot from Highland called out across the area. “Makoto Takatsuki, the adventurer from Macallan. Her Honored Highness Princess Noelle offers her own thanks. You may approach!”

The adventurers turned toward us as one.

Well, that was sobering. I didn’t have any decent memories with princesses.

“Makoto Takatsuki, adventurer from Macallan, do not keep Her Highness waiting!”

I can hear you just fine... You don’t need to use my full name every time.

“Do I have to go?” I asked my friends.

“Obviously! She’s the princess of the biggest country on the continent!” Lucy exclaimed.

“You must be careful’h,” Nina added.

“Sir Sakurai is there, so I imagine he will aid you.”

Off I go then, I guess.

"Good luck," Sasa added, mouth full of roast beef.

Damn it, they're just pushing it all on me.

With heavy feet, I made my way to the corner of the tavern containing all the knights and nobles. The table had a fine design on it, along with bottles of high-class alcohol and fancy-looking food, which looked different than the fare that this tavern usually served. Maybe I could take some?

"Hey, Takatsuki."

"Oh, hey, Sakurai. Why'd he call me over?" I asked.

"I mentioned you to Princess Noelle and she said she wanted to meet you."

So it's your fault?!

I gave him a glare which he answered with a laughing apology before leading me over to a noble-looking woman. The older guy who'd partitioned this area off earlier was also there. I suspected that he was some kind of aide.

"So you are Makoto Takatsuki? Hmph, a sorry sight to present to the princess."

Excuse me? Where does he get off calling me over and then insulting me?

"What is your job?" he asked.

"I'm an apprentice mage," I answered after a pause. I might have a skill that made me an elementalist, but that wasn't seen as a job, so I just gave the one written in my Soul Book.

"An apprentice?! Not the companion of our otherworldly hero?! A low-born like you should—"

"Robert, I summoned him. Contain yourself."

"My apologies," the man said reluctantly, taking a step back.

Getting along with him would be a lost cause.

"It's nice to meet you, Makoto. I am Noelle Althena Highland, priestess of the sun goddess. I offer our gratitude for your aid in the subjugation of the blight dragons."

Her voice was clear, almost like an instrument being played into my ear. She had beautiful blonde hair and large blue eyes. She was the very picture of a princess.

"My name is Makoto Takatsuki. I am deeply honored for your acknowledgment…but the blight dragons were defeated by Sakurai."

"It wasn't just me," Sakurai protested. "It's only because of you that we suffered no casualties."

"Oh, it seems that the two of you are well-acquainted," the princess said with a smile.

Her smile was charismatic, and it reminded me of the idols from our old world. She seemed much more amiable than I'd expected from someone so highly ranked in the biggest country on the continent. I didn't doubt that she was popular with her commoners as well.

“You will be thanked more properly in the future—these are mere greetings,” she added.

“Umm…it’s an honor.”

Nope, no good. What should I say? Sakurai! Help! I thought, glancing over at my former classmate.

“Princess Noelle. Takatsuki is a capable mage, so perhaps you could invite him as a guest of Highland?”

No! That’s not what I meant! Take a hint!

“It is rather rare for you to go so far, Ryousuke. He is, however, a citizen of Roses. Sophia will be rather put out with me if I just take him. Isn’t that right, Sophia?”

Ugh, so she’s here too.

I glanced over and saw Princess Sophia, the Priestess of the Water Goddess, standing there.

“Indeed, he is a citizen of Roses. It is good to meet you, Makoto Takatsuki. Thank you for coming.”

She’d completely forgotten me. Well, I suppose a princess wouldn’t remember everyone they’d only met once.

“You insolent man! You are before Princess Sophia! Show some respect and kneel!”

Just as I was trying to decide how to greet her, the knight next to her started yelling at me.

Oh, it was her personal guard. Guess he was here too. I suppose it’d been a while since I’d seen him, but he was as loud as ever.

So…am I not supposed to stay standing in front of a princess?

I glanced at Princess Noelle.

“Things aren’t so formal today,” she said with a smile.

Hmm, she’s much more lenient. More easygoing. On the other hand…

Princess Sophia continued without smiling. “You need not worry, Makoto Takatsuki. You seem to be a capable mage. I would grant you the divine protection of our country’s patron goddess. I would also welcome you as one of the most honored mages in our country.”

You…what?

“Show your gratitude! I’ll be working you hard!” the knight blathered on next to her.

I was getting pretty pissed.

You lot turned your backs on me in the Water Temple. When I really wanted that blessing, you all told me that I lacked the necessary training. Didn’t you just glance at me and think “some other time”? And now you’re back, out of nowhere, offering that very blessing?

My two-year-old anger reignited.

“I’ll pass,” I said.

“What was that?” the knight demanded, stepping closer. “Do you understand the position you are in?”

“Makoto Takatsuki, does something displease you?” asked Princess Sophia.

Seriously, full marks to this pair.

The words just seemed to fall from my mouth. “You turned your backs on me when I wanted to follow the water goddess two years ago, and now you want me? Rather selfish, isn’t it?”

No, these were nobles and royals. In this world, they were the elite. This wasn’t Japan, after all, but a kingdom *ruled* by them. They may have been selfish, but it didn’t do me any good to go against them. Even so, I wouldn’t roll over and become their subordinate either.

“Are you…?” the princess began. Maybe she had some clue now.

“Don’t think you can take that tone with Her Highness and remain in Roses!” the knight yelled, blatantly threatening.

“I’ll leave then. I’m not working for you people.”

Whoops, I said it... That was…perhaps rash.

My my, Makoto, how short-tempered.

Yeah, Goddess, that’s accurate. I’m too inexperienced with this sort of thing.

“Oh, if you have nowhere to go, then Highland will welcome you with open arms,” Princess Noelle suggested with a smile.

That might not be a bad idea actually.

Princess Sophia was sporting a sour look on her face.

“Takatsuki…” Sakurai said. “If you need help, just tell me.”

“Right… Thanks, Sakurai.”

I gave Highland’s princess and Sakurai a slight bow and then left. I didn’t spare a look at the other one or her knight.

Urgh, I screwed up...

My feet were even heavier as I made my way back to everyone.

“Mister Takatsuki’h…”

“Makoto…”

Nina and Lucy had looks varying between shock and concern on their faces as I got back. Both of them had great hearing, so they must’ve heard me.

“My esteemed Tackie, being rude to Princess Sophia is something I would…”

“Nah, I really screwed up,” I admitted to him.

He cackled.

“Takatsuki, have something sweet and calm down,” Sasa said, pushing a cake toward me. I didn’t know we’d gotten cakes too.

“That was a shock’h,” Nina said. “I’ve never seen you so angry’h.”

“I mean, they ignored him two years ago, then forgot about it, and now they want him to work for them? Obviously he’s angry!” Lucy was being sentimental, but she was always on my side.

I was glad for that, to be honest.

“Tackie... Will you leave Macallan and move to Highland?” Fujiyan asked sadly.

“Hmm, well, her knight did tell me to leave...”

“We’re going to the country Sakurai’s in?” Sasa wondered while wolfing down doughnuts and pancakes. Hadn’t she eaten enough sweet things?

“Not like I have much choice.”

“I’ll come with you, then.”

I turned to Sasa in surprise.

“What do you look like that for?” she asked. “It’s not as if I have much choice—you’re really all I’ve got.” She gave me an expectant look as she downed her wine.

I wasn’t entirely sure that wine and doughnuts went together.

“Hmmm, Highland...” Lucy mused with an odd look on her face.

“Do you not want to go?” I asked.

“Highland is very human supremacist’h. Elves like Lucy and beastmen like me find it difficult to live there’h,” Nina told me.

Oh? It is? Never knew that.

“Demi-humans and beastears in Highland get worse treatment than humans. I am not personally well-disposed toward it. One of the benefits of Roses is the relatively low incidence of such discrimination.”

“So you’re focusing on your preferences over profit?” I asked him.

“But naturally!”

Yup, same old Fujiyan.

“Nina, do you dislike the country too?” I asked.

“The nobles and merchants there constantly harass us. We cannot speak too curtly of our clients, though’h.”

H-Hmmm. Nina doesn’t have a great impression of the country either.

“Most importantly,” Fujiyan continued, “if Lady Sasaki’s status as a lamia were to be discovered, then that would be the end of things. You would certainly be driven out.”

“Right... I guess my goddess getting discovered would end pretty much the same...”

“That’s the same everywhere!” the three other than Sasa chorused.

Oh, yeah...

“I’d never see Lucas, Mary, or the skewer guy. Jean or Emily either...”

“So will you give up on leaving the country?” Fujiyan asked expectantly.

“Hmm, maybe I should apologize...” I’d really run my mouth, so I didn’t exactly want to face her. Maybe I should ask Sakurai? Hmm, but...

“Hey, things got pretty tense.” As I fretted, the handsome hero in question spoke up next to me.

You bastard! Whose fault do you think it is?!

“That’s because you just had to go and make that suggestion,” I told him. “Do something about it.” I sent him a glare.

Yokoyama was at his side, hiding slightly behind him.

“It’s fine. You can join the Soleil Knights and I’ll support you with all my strength,” Sakurai told me with a grin.

I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“That’s not gonna happen.”

The Soleil Knights? So, the army, essentially? In school, I’d been a proud member of the go-home club. I was never going to join that group representing the pinnacle of jocks!

Don’t make me laugh! I’d drop out within a day.

“T-Takatsuki. Um, thank you…for earlier,” Yokoyama said, bowing her head. It was actually pretty rare that she’d speak to me.

Also, was she…afraid?

“It was no big deal,” I told her.

“Wh-What?! You used king rank magic and you were the second-most valuable person during the quest! There are not many mages in Highland that could have cast that magic!”

Everyone brought up the rank of my spell, but no one knew that it’d taken seven days for me to get the ability to use it *once*.

“Well, whatever. Did you need something, Sakurai?”

“Yeah. The Grandsage wants to meet you…well, wants to meet the elementalist.”

“W-Wow!” Lucy exclaimed. “She rarely ever shows herself to people! That’s great, Makoto.”

It was almost like she was happy for herself.

“Urgh…I don’t want to meet any more big shots. Can I give it a miss?” Things had gone terribly earlier, even if it had been my own fault.

“My esteemed Tackie… The Grandsage is the third-most influential person in Highland. You should likely answer her summons…”

“Mister Takatsuki’h… She has greater standing than even Princess Noelle’h.”

The looks of disappointment on their faces let me know that I’d have to go.

“Do I have to go alone?” I asked.

“Nope, she said you can bring your friends,” Sakurai told me.

“Right. Lucy, Sasa, you’re coming with.”

I didn’t want to be alone with her.

“I can? Yay!” Lucy leaped with joy.

“Ugh, that sounds annoying. I’ll stay,” Sasa decided with a grimace.

“No, you’re coming.”

“Aww, you tyrant!”

Despite her protests, I dragged along our ever-eating friend.

“Fujiyan?”

“Hmm… Well, I’d like to meet her, but we cannot leave the table unattended, so I shall stay.”

“Mister Takatsuki, don’t pick a fight with her’h.” Nina looked like an older sister worrying after her little brother who’d gone off the rails.

“I wouldn’t do that...” I said.

And so, we followed Sakurai to their garrison.

On our way, I asked Lucy, “Do you know what kind of person the Grandsage is?”

“She’s way too above us, so no,” was her answer.

“Yeah, figures...”

The lessons at the temple had taught me that she was a mage and that she was behind much of Highland’s influence. I’d also learned that she was beyond average mages like us, even after a lifetime.

“The first Grandsage was a hero that fought alongside Abel the Savior a thousand years ago. The person you’re going to meet is the fifteenth holder of that title,” Sakurai explained.

“Hmm, even if the first one is great, that doesn’t mean the successors are,” Sasa sniped. Well, that was a tad harsh. Hopefully, she doesn’t say it in front of the actual sage. Though, I actually thought the same.

“That’s not true, Aya,” he added. “There’s a skill called *Inheritance*.”

“The power is passed down through each of them, and that’s why she’s called the Grandsage.”

“Huh, I get it.” So the legendary mage’s power had been passed down through the ages? That sounded strong. While I was considering that, we arrived at a big tent.

Suddenly, I heard something like static in my ears.

M..k...to. Makoto! Don’t...inside! D...mn it! ...rrier...

Goddess? Is something wrong?

You can’t...meet...

What was that? Things between us had never felt so disjointed before. What should we do...? Maybe avoiding her would be best.

“Grandsage. It’s Sakurai, acting leader of the Seventh Order of the Soleil Knights. I have brought the elementalist Takatsuki with me,” he called into the tent.

What should I do...?

Maybe I should follow my goddess’s advice and leave? We’d come so far though.

“Grandsage? Are you there?”

We heard no answer to his calls.

“Maybe she’s out?” Lucy suggested.

Right! Then we can leave.

“Eh? You want them to come in alone?” Sakurai seemingly asked the air. “A-All right, I understand.”

“Sakurai, what’s up?” I asked, turning to him as he talked to himself.

“The Grandsage was speaking to me with *Telepathy*. She wants just you three to go in.”

“Wha...”

Come with us, Sakurai. I'm getting more and more nervous. But as I was getting my thoughts in order, he pushed us into the tent.

"Excuuuse us..."

The tent was dark, with the odd lantern floating in the air.

The whole area was full of stuff, and we threaded our way through the furniture, venturing further inside the tent along what were practically corridors. At the end of the path, we found a small, white-robed mage sitting on a huge sofa. Should we get closer?

"Come this way. Talking like this is difficult." Her voice was that of a young girl, not an elderly woman like I'd imagined.

I did what she asked, moving to just a few meters away. I could see pure-white hair covered by her hood. She sure was the *white* Grandsage.

"I'm Makoto Takatsuki, an apprentice mage. These are my companions, Lucy J. Walker and Aya Sasaki."

"It's good to meet you all."

"Hi there."

The Grandsage stalked over to us and glared steadily in our direction. She looked like a gorgeous young girl at first, but there was something *off* about her. Her red eyes were piercing and seemed to look right through us.

How old was she? She couldn't be as young as she looked.

"So you're a cross between an elf and a demon," she said, looking at Lucy.

She shifted her gaze to Sasa. "So you're a lamia. Strong enough to be a calamity level monster as well. Interesting," she grinned.

Crap! She's got Appraisal!

Sasa looked puzzled, not quite understanding the situation.

Argh, damn it!

Demons and monsters were hunted! I should have listened to the goddess!

"No need to be so wary," the Grandsage said with a wide grin. "You helped the Hero of Light boy, didn't you? Elementalists are rare nowadays, so I thought it'd be interesting to meet you. Your friends are intriguing in their own rights."

She...didn't care that they were part-demon and a monster?

"It seems that I gave you a bit of a shock. Come and sit, I'll give you a cup of tea." She gestured toward an aged table, big and round, surrounded by old-looking chairs. Maybe they were antiques? They sure looked expensive.

"You sit here," she said to me, gesturing to the seat next to her for some reason.

Th-That makes me more nervous.

Just as I was wondering whether she had some servant, a pot of tea came floating in and landed in front of us, along with a complement of

teacups. Tea was magically poured out into the cups, and the accompanying aroma was vaguely citrus.

She used magic as a part of life? People with mana to burn sure have it easy, huh?

"As for snacks...these should do."

A plate piled high with food appeared in front of us.

How did she...?

"Wh-Was that a *Teleport*?" I asked.

"Well spotted."

Th-That was a chantless Teleport.

It was a spell that was just this side of legendary, something only very few people on the continent could use. She was beyond everything... No way we could stand against her. Actually, we probably couldn't even run...

"So, what did you need with us?" I asked as Sasa dug into the snacks.

Sasa's sure got some bravery... I mused. It was hardly surprising though, considering that she'd grown up in the dungeon.

"As I already said, I was just interested. I heard that someone dragged out those blight dragons with elemental magic. I'd estimated that it would take the Hero of Light boy another month or so to defeat them."

"Wouldn't it have been over right away if you'd helped him?" I asked, remembering what Yokoyama had told us.

"If I had, then this exercise wouldn't have been useful training. The Great Demon Lord is returning, and if the Hero of Light had struggled with just two evil dragons, then we'd have an issue on our hands."

That made sense—she purposefully hadn't helped.

"Incidentally..." she continued. "Red-headed mage."

"Y-Yes?" Lucy asked, her nerves stopping her from speaking much.

"Have you realized that your mana is heating your body?"

"Wha?"

I shared her surprise.

"Did you just think that it was your nature? It's due to your mana being out of control."

"H-How do I...?"

"Take this. Wear it," the Grandsage said, rolling a bracelet over to Lucy. "It's an item that calms mana flows. It costs about the same as a house, just so you know. Use it well."

"A-Are you sure?" I asked timidly. Wasn't she being way too kind? She wasn't going to stick us with a massive bill later, was she?

"The Great Demon Lord will be back soon, so we need strong fighters. I'm not about to leave an untapped mage like that." At the end of her statement, she turned to Sasa. "Hungry lamia over there," she said.

"Yesh?"

Sasa! Come on, at least finish what's in your mouth first!

“The *Transformation* skill you have is superb. You aren’t some half-finished blue humanoid, but a complete human. In fact, you should be able to use it to transform into anything, even a dragon or demon.”

“Oh? My sisters taught it to us as human disguise magic.”

“That’s the skill lamiae have, but your skill is on a higher level.”

“Oh, I see… Thank you.”

This was incredible. She was just handing out useful items and advice. Was she a support character?

“Now, elementalist, you’re the problem.”

“I’m just a human,” I told her after a minute.

“Oh?” Her eyes narrowed in amusement as she put her hand on my head.

She was like Sasa; her hands were cold.

“Let’s take a look at your stats. It’s easier to use *Appraisal* with skin contact… Well now, you have a rather one-sided distribution. Everything’s low other than your proficiency with water magic.”

Her magic kinda tickled.

“Hmm… That won’t do.” Suddenly, she grabbed at my head. “Are you a wicked deity’s disciple?”

Time froze.

Lucy and I were speechless, and the only sound was Sasa opening snacks.

“Ah, no, I’m not,” I said robotically, trying to gloss things over with a smile.

It was a crime. The worst crime, in fact. One that carried the death penalty. I could remember Fujiyan, Nina, and Lucy telling me that.

“Disciple of the Wicked Deity Noah… You’re the second one I’ve met.” There was an inscrutable expression on her face as her hand remained on top of my head.

“Ah, no…there’s some mistake…”

“I’m sure it was a thousand years ago—the Mad Hero that followed the Great Demon Lord.”

“What? The legendary hero-killer?” Lucy interrupted.

“Lucy, who’s the Mad Hero?”

“In the story of the savior, he was an enemy of mankind and the Great Demon Lord’s right-hand man. He’s said to have been a berserker that killed every hero except the Hero of Light. Abel the Savior finally killed him…apparently. That…was Noah’s disciple?”

Uh, Noah, what are you doing? You didn’t mention any of that, I thought as Lucy got more and more worried.

“But…the disciple I knew was much more crazed. He couldn’t hold a conversation at least.”

What had happened to him?

“It sounds like you saw him,” I commented.

“I did…I have the memories from back then.”

That must be the *Inheritance* skill.

"Will you remain her disciple?" she asked, sharp gaze boring into my eyes.

Wh-What do I tell her?

"Well, um…I'm not the disciple of a wicked deity…" It grated, but all I could do was continue the same excuse.

"So you still will not admit it… Hmm, let's leave things there, then." She released her grip, mussing up my hair before removing her hand.

"When you come to Highland, seek me out. I'll train you."

Uh? That's it?

"U-Um, are you sure?"

A demon, a monster, and a wicked deity's disciple. We were a triple threat party. She'd just overlook that?

"I already explained. We need many strong fighters to prepare for the Great Demon Lord's revival. If you stand against us, then I will take responsibility and deal with you." She grinned.

Whoa, scary.

"But…we're not planning on fighting, right?"

"We're not?" Sasa asked in surprise.

I'm no hero. I'm not even strong.

"If the Great Demon Lord is resurrected, the people living here, along with the demons, will be at war. If we lose, we will all be cattle for the demons."

So we won't be able to avoid it?

"Elementalist, I would suggest that you stop following your goddess before the next time we meet. Being her believer will bring nothing but misfortune."

Once the Grandsage had finished speaking, she lay down sideways. In moments, I could hear snoring.

Was she asleep?!

She'd just ended up giving us advice and an item. If you ignored the last bit, this encounter could be considered perfect…

I was conflicted as we got back to our table. The feast looked to be moving toward its end.

I'm all sobered up…

I was swaying as I walked and I'd completely lost my appetite. My head was foggy too.

"Mister Takatsuki, you've got a guest'h," Nina said, poking me in the shoulder.

The guest in question was the water goddess's priestess, the princess of Roses, Sophia Eir Roses.

And here I was, already depressed after what'd happened with the Grandsage…

So here you come on top of everything…

“Makoto Takatsuki. May I have a moment?”

It was a cold, piercing voice that felt like the chill of spring water. As she came to our table, her expression was as emotionless as ever. She had a knight guarding her, but it wasn’t the self-important guy from earlier.

“What do you need?” I asked, using *Calm Mind* to feign, well, *calm* for our conversation.

“I made him resign as my bodyguard.”

“What?” I didn’t understand what she’d meant at first, but after a minute, I realized that she was talking about the loud guard.

Wait, she fired him?

“It was punishment for the discomfort he placed on the hero that saved Labyrinth Town. Will you forgive us?”

“Forget forgiveness, I… Actually, I’m not a hero to begin with.”

“You are one of the heroes that came here from another world. I would like you to remain in Roses.”

Huh…

I was shocked that she was being so appeasing. I was just an apprentice mage.

“Hey, hey,” Lucy said, pulling on my sleeve.

I get it, okay? You don’t need to pull me.

“I rather like Macallan, so I’ll keep working as an adventurer there.”

When she heard that, her expression shifted slightly into relief, before immediately returning to its original blankness.

“Is there anything that you want? If it is something I can grant, I would be happy to.”

Oh, well that was generous. There wasn’t anything I wanted, though… Wait, I know. I can do something for my friend, seeing as he’s always helping me.

“Actually, this has to do with my friend Fujiwara here.”

“T-Tackie?!” he managed, strangled. He should’ve known where I was going, though. Surely he was using his *Waifu Game Player* skill to read my mind?

“Our efforts so far would have been impossible without his support. He, too, is one of the heroes from our world, and he has been vital to my success.”

“I see…” she said. “What precisely would you have me do?”

Fujiyan, sorry for bringing this up out of nowhere. He was telling me with his eyes that it was too sudden, but I’d thought of something.

“Maybe something like free trade through the country, particularly in noble towns.”

“Very well, I will allow it in my name. Please come to the capital soon.”

“Thank you,” we both chorused with a bow.

That should work.

“I hope we will meet again,” she said before leaving.

“My esteemed Tackie! I did not think you would pull me in so suddenly!” Fujiyan protested, smacking me.

“Ah, my bad. Aren’t you glad with how it turned out, though?”

“It is wonderful! For my trade to be guaranteed in the first princess’s name is incredible! It is a winner-take-all situation for me in Roses now…”

That look on his face was a bit creepy…

“M-Mister Takatsuki, that was terrifying’h…” Nina said with a tight smile.

“Did I do something strange?” I asked.

“Makoto… When a royal asks you that, you’re supposed to refuse it once.”

“The boss knows no fear either’h.”

“I didn’t know that, though,” I pointed out. “I’m an otherworlder, after all.”

“Still, she really wanted you to stay,” Sasa commented.

“Yeah, after how rude they were earlier, she was sure easygoing.”

“I would imagine that she was internally seething,” Fujiyan commented.

If he was saying that, it must be true. Eh, whatever.

“The warriors and mages that Roses initially scouted have all left the country or have gotten too injured to fight’h,” Nina explained.

Oh, they have?

“Our classmates too?” I asked.

“Indeed. Apparently, they could not meet the strict laws of Roses. This country is a theocratic kingdom, and there are many laws and customs that come with it,” added Fujiyan.

Right, the country was pretty big on the whole religion thing.

“It’s led to rumors of Princess Sophia having no discernment’h,” Nina took up the explanation. “While Princess Noelle has nothing but capable people around her’h.”

Oh, so some rather harsh rumors.

“So that’s why she was so desperate to keep an apprentice mage that she’d previously turned her back on,” I said in realization.

“Well, we don’t have to leave Roses now, so that’s fine!” Lucy exclaimed.

She was right.

“Let’s head home then, back to Macallan.”

“Yeah!”

I wanted to go eat some skewers and talk things through with Lucas and Mary. I needed to tell Jean and Emily about Labyrinthos as well. We also needed to show Sasa around town.

Thus ended our adventure to Labyrinthos. There were still doubts in my heart, though. Especially because of the words that the Grandsage had said about Noah’s previous disciple.

It looked like I needed to talk to the goddess.

Epilogue: Pact between Goddess and Believer

I dreamed of the goddess's space.

Figures she'd call me here, I thought.

I turned and saw her sitting on the floor with her knees up. Despite the length, or lack thereof, of the skirt she was wearing, her panties were...still not actually visible. Her absolute territory was as impregnable as ever.

"What're you doing?"

Even as I walked up to her, she wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Goddess?"

"Makoto, are you going to stop being my believer?"

"I haven't even said anything yet," I protested.

"That crap the white girl came out with is bothering you, though, isn't it?"

The white...did she mean the White Grandsage?

"Were you allied with the Great Demon Lord a thousand years ago?" I asked.

"Maybe..." she answered after a pause, her face all closed off. Guess she was sulking.

"I haven't said anything about leaving."

My elemental magic was a gift skill given to me by her. I needed to be able to use it, so it was a matter of life and death.

"Even if you leave, you'll keep the skill," she told me.

"Oh? I will?"

"Gods aren't so narrow-minded that we'll take back what we've given."

Huh, they're not?

"So?" she prompted. "Are you leaving?"

"Seriously, why are you so focused on—"

"I mean...you're suspicious of me, aren't you?"

Well, she *could* read minds after all. Still...

"I thought you were shifty to begin with."

After all, she hadn't introduced herself, and she'd hidden her identity as one of the wicked deities. Our current conversation was going nowhere, though. I needed to dig deeper into this.

"Why was my predecessor the demon lord's ally?"

"There were lots of reasons."

So she didn't want to tell me at all? Her hesitancy aside, this was actually something I needed to know.

"Goddess, what is it that you want? Tell me, please."

There was a long pause as she looked at me in shock. "Requests usually go the other way around—why's a believer asking what his goddess wants?"

Silence was all that could be heard for a while, and I just looked vaguely toward the side of her face. Every time I saw her she was indescribably peerless. *Ah, that got a smile.*

She gave a sigh and then seemed to surrender before slowly beginning to speak.

"I first came into being after the Titans lost in Titanomachy. They were all imprisoned in Tartarus and I was alone... For a while, I lived with the Titanea, but the Sacred Deities soon challenged them as well, and succeeded in killing or sealing them all away... After that, I was alone for fifteen million years. I tried all I could to free the survivors, but I ended up sealed in the Seafloor Temple... There's nothing else I can do on my own...but I still want to save my family..."

Helping the Titans... That was her true wish. I didn't think that any human could reach the place where they were sealed, though. Besides, there was something else... The Grandsage had mentioned something that the goddess's story didn't explain.

"Why did your disciple kill heroes a thousand years ago?" I asked.

"It was the Daemons. They were beings allied with the Great Demon Lord, but they said that if we killed heroes, they'd aid in freeing the Titans."

D-Daemons? I'd never heard the word before, so I guess that was another group to add to my knowledge of this world.

"Daemons were gods that created the demons and monsters. They fought with the Sacred Deities. They didn't keep their vow to us, though..." the goddess said sadly.

"So I don't need to kill heroes this time?"

"Do you think you even *could*?"

I thought back to Sakurai taking out those blight dragons with a single blow apiece... Yeah, with my stats, killing heroes ain't happening. I'd have to hard pass on fighting my classmates as well.

"The situations now and back then are entirely different," Noah stated. "In the past, the Great Demon Lord reigned over the lands with demons and humanity was hopeless. The faith in the Sacred Deities weakened with that hope, so I thought that allying with the Daemons would work better."

"Right... I see."

"Don't you think I regret it?! You're obliged to become some goddess's believer the moment you're born on these lands! I can't get any believers like that!" she cried out, her voice getting hoarse. "So I saw my chance when you turned up from another world. After all, Japan is secular!"

Well, there're a fair few Buddhists, but close enough, I guess...

"But my classmates were all scouted by the Sacred Deities as well," I pointed out.

"And you were the only one left. On top of that, I hadn't even considered that my charm magic might not have any effect on a human..."

She sure was the scheming sort.

“What do you mean by scheming? All goddesses give their believers pleasant dreams to keep them in the fold,” she insisted.

“Do they now…?”

To be honest, that wasn’t something I particularly wanted to hear.

“So, what do you want to do?” I asked, pulling the conversation back on track.

“The strength of the Sacred Deities comes from their faith. The more faith their believers give them, the stronger they are, and the stronger their rule over this world becomes. Conversely, if their believers lose hope, their faith drops and their strength weakens.”

So, something that would cause humanity to despair. Like, say…

“The Great Demon Lord’s resurrection?” That was apparently something still a few years away.

“Right.” The goddess nodded.

“I’m not exactly eager to be his underling though, you know?” I said. I wouldn’t want to follow the Great Demon Lord, but challenging him was also something I’d rather not do.

“I know. I don’t trust the Daemons and their demons either.”

Was that true, Goddess? Well, whatever. I could choose for myself who to ally with, after all.

“Bang on the money, the white girl’s actually right,” Noah said. “The Great Demon Lord would see all of humanity treated as less than slaves, and a thousand years ago, things were indeed awful.”

I sighed.

I wished Sakurai good luck with that; we’d definitely need everyone working together.

“That was a lot to take in all at once…” I commented, putting my hand on my chin and sorting out my thoughts. “So I’d like to summarize it all. There are three things I need to do, then. First, I need to do something about the Great Demon Lord’s return in the next few years. Second, I need to weaken the faith in the Sacred Deities and also weaken *them*. Third, if I manage all that, then maybe we can save the Titans. Is that about right, Goddess?”

Could I do that? It all sounded crazy difficult. I definitely would have refused her if she’d brought this up right after I’d left the temple.

“I wouldn’t ask my only believer for something ridiculous like that,” she answered. “Mainly, I just want you to be able to live your life as you want.” Then, with a cutesy face, she added, “After all, the whole reason I told you to come to Labyrinthos was with the noble intention of letting you reunite with your friend.”

Noble intention, sure…

“What! It was!”

“You hide way too much.” Also, the truth had eventually come out.

Hearing that, she began to weep and cry.

Right, here's the crocodile tears. I'd managed to learn how to tell the difference recently.

"Stop! You keep seeing through me!" she insisted. "B-But, this is a chance. For the entirety of the past thousand years, faith in the Sacred Deities has been getting stronger and stronger. The Daemons hate that, and so they're trying to start attacks in earnest with demons. We might be able to take advantage of that to progress our own goals."

"By 'take advantage of that,' what exactly do you mean?"

"That you take the limelight rather than the Sacred Deities' hero," she answered. "If you do, then people will start thinking that those goddesses can't be relied upon...and they might decide that your goddess is better."

"Would that even work?" I was uneasy about this plan, and she could probably read it in my thoughts.

"Well, I won't force it—you should do as you please."

Hmm, so I've got a choice?

There was one last thing the Grandsage had said that was on my mind, though.

"So my predecessor... Apparently, he went crazy?"

"W-Well, that makes it sound malicious. He just fell for my charms and went a bit weird! He was always super happy though!"

Happy? Really? I wondered if he'd gotten properly captured by her charm magic. That was like falling to corruption and being the only one pleased about it.

"Besides, *Charm* doesn't work on you, so it doesn't matter, right?"

"I mean, it doesn't work, no..." But was that really the issue? I guess gods and humans had completely different value systems, so I'd probably never fully understand.

"So then, what will you do?" the goddess asked, looking right at me.

```
Will you accept the invitation from Wicked Deity Noah and
overturn the World System?
Yes
No
```

Seriously, RPG Player? This...was maybe the hardest decision I'd ever had to make.

I looked at Noah again. She was a divine-looking, beautiful, adorable girl.

So she's been fighting the Sacred Deities all alone this entire time...?

She'd been alone since the time of myth... Honestly, I couldn't even imagine it. I suppose the loneliness would've been thousands of times worse than how I'd felt during my training in the year or so that I'd been here. And I couldn't forget that *she* was the one who'd called to me once I'd left the Water Temple.

Ulterior motive or not.

Noah was the reason I had survived fighting the griffin.

Noah was the one that had given me elemental magic.

Noah had led me to meet Sasa and Sakurai again.

She's done nothing but give to me...

And I hadn't given anything back yet. One had to reciprocate favors, or they would simply be ungrateful.

"Makoto, what will you do?"

She rested her chin in her hand and stared at me with her beautiful eyes.

I saw the *RPG Player* selection screen again.

Will you accept the invitation from Wicked Deity Noah and overturn the World System?
Yes
No

The Sacred Deities ruled this world, so I'd be going against them. And unlike my mad predecessor from a thousand years ago, I would also have to face the Daemons.

I was the only believer of a wicked deity in this world, so, in other words...

I was the world's enemy...

The difficulty level's gotten really unbalanced here. Enough so that I snorted, thinking about what a rage game this world would make.

That's fine, though.

I didn't really hesitate; I knew what I should pick. After all, I always played games on hard mode.

It's more fun like that, right?

"Let's grant your wish together," I said, kneeling in front of Noah and meeting her eyes.

Her gorgeous gaze wavered, and I felt like I'd fall into it.

Maybe...maybe I've been affected by charm magic the entire time.

"Thanks, Makoto."

Her smile was blinding.

And thus, I officially started aiming to overthrow the world with Noah, and, with full understanding, truly became the believer of a wicked deity.

After Episode: Stopping Off on the Way Home from Labyrinthos

“Whoa! An airship?!” Sasa exclaimed. She stood at the bow of the boat, spreading her arms in the breeze.

She’s doing the same thing that Lucy did.

“Miss Sasaki’h! That’s dangerous’h!”

Even Nina’s scolding was the same. *At least Sasa’s having fun.*

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Labyrinthos grew further away. Next to the town, I could see the Soleil Knights making their own preparations to leave.

“See you, Sakurai,” I said. We hadn’t been able to wish each other farewell, so I had to make do with saying it from the ship.

Being the Hero of Light and the savior reborn must be pretty difficult, so I wished him luck. Maybe I’d go visit him in Highland if I felt like it.

The weather today was gorgeous, perfect for setting out on a journey.

“Takatsuki, what’s that?” asked Sasa a few hours later.

We’d been traveling through the sky for a while, and she’d spied a huge collection of tents below.

“A bazaar!” Fujiyan exclaimed. “It is rare indeed for one to be in such a place!”

I hadn’t ever seen one. What was it, like a market?

“Have you heard of them, Lucy?”

“They’re something like a big business meeting that merchants hold periodically to all trade together. It’s human culture you never see in Springrogue.”

“Well, Boss’h? Do you want to stop’h?”

“Hmmm, I suppose so. What do you say, my esteemed Tackie?” Fujiyan asked, turning to me.

“Let’s go!”

I couldn’t pass up the chance to see my first bazaar! We stopped nearby and then headed for the tents. The area was bustling with people. Clothes, weapons, magic items, food, and even animals were all on sale.

I’d never seen anything like some of the clothing designs—were they foreign? There were also lots of rare weapons and food I’d never seen before.

“Hey, mister! We’ve got some good stuff! Come take a look!”

“Hey there, mister, stop by!”

On top of that, the salespeople were pretty aggressive with their marketing. I was getting yelled at from all sides. Did they think I was a sucker?

“My esteemed Tackie, you must not pay the asking price at a bazaar like this. Most prices are set at three times higher than the true value, so make certain you haggle the price down.”

“Th-Three times?” I was shocked, but Nina and Lucy both seemed to have expected it.

Haggling, huh? I was fairly shy, so that was too much for me.

Sasa was the one to open negotiations. “Hey, mister,” she said, “what about this price?”

“Come on, little miss, I’ll end up in the red.”

“Aww, forget it, then.”

“Well, let’s not be hasty! What about this?”

“One more time!”

“Fine, then this?”

“Yayyy!”

“Take it, you thief.”

Sasa had driven the price right down… Well, she’d always been pretty sociable.

“I will be surveying the stalls with Lady Nina. Will you be joining us?” Fujiyan invited me.

Nina’s expression was the same as ever, just an unreadable grin. I remembered our conversation back in Labyrinthos, though.

I think I’d like to give her a chance.

“Nah, I feel like taking it slow,” I responded.

“I see…” Fujiyan seemed vaguely disappointed as he and Nina set off.

As they left, Nina gave me a slight nod. I must’ve made the right choice.

Okay then, where to now? The stalls were full of things I’d never seen and just looking was fun.

“Makoto, let’s walk around together!”

“Takatsuki, let’s go!”

Lucy had grabbed my right arm, and Sasa had my left. The two of them stared silently at each other, with me caught in the middle.

The air felt like it’d gotten a little colder.

“Lu, you can come too.”

“Aya, come with us.”

What was with the tension in the air?

Apparently, Sasa was calling Lucy “Lu,” which at least sounded friendly, but… The two of them seemed slightly aggressive toward each other.

“Right, let’s head around with the three of us.”

“Sure.”

“All right!”

Great, everyone’s friendly in our party! Right?

Lucy, Sasa, and I perused around a lot of the stalls.

As we went, we picked up some lunch: a sandwich with thick ham and vegetables, along with skewered and salted fish. I guess you could call the meal vaguely exotic as far as the seasoning went? The food contained plenty

of spices and had a really distinct taste, though a pleasant one. We also had a mixed fruit juice to drink, which was pretty sweet.

"Water Magic: Chill."

The liquid was lukewarm, so a little water magic cooled it down to the perfect temperature.

"This is great, Takatsuki," Sasa commented.

"Your magic's really handy."

The other two seemed to enjoy it too, which was good.

After lunch, we ended up in an area with a fair few clothes. Lots of the stalls were selling women's clothes, and most of them were carrying different designs than the ones we saw in Macallan.

Women seemed to like fashion, no matter what world they were in. Both of the girls' eyes were sparkling, so I figured we might as well take a look.

Lucy and Sasa were in the middle of clothes hunting.

"Hey, Makoto, what do you think?" Lucy was holding up a bright red dress that looked similar to a cheongsam.

She sure likes red. "I think it works." It'd suit her well.

"Really? Well, if you say so—"

"Hey, Takatsuki! What about this?" Sasa demanded, throwing herself into the conversation.

She was holding a white shirt and orange skirt, like the type you might see in a more southern country.

"Pretty cute," I told her. It'd fit her well.

"Right, then I'll go with this."

For some reason, the two wordlessly stared at each other.

"I'm trying it on!" they yelled in unison before vanishing into the dressing room tent.

I wonder if there's anything cool for me?

We were at a bazaar, after all, so I kinda wanted to buy something new. Unfortunately, there wasn't much equipment I could use with my low Strength stat. I also already had a *divine* weapon; I wasn't going to find anything here that would surpass the Dagger of the Goddess.

Of course not, I heard.

Yeah, Noah, that figures.

"Here I am! What do you think?" Lucy asked as she bounded from the changing room.

"Wh-Whoa…!" I said unintentionally.

The dress was tight against her and had a daring side-slit that showed off her thighs. With all the skin it showed, it looked even more risqué than her usual mini skirt.

"I-It looks good on you," I said. More like hot, to be honest.

I used *Calm Mind* to keep the blush off my face.

"Really? You like clothes like this?" Lucy looked at me with upturned eyes and stepped toward me.

Gurk... Wearing different clothes gives her a different impression.

I was getting all tense with nerves when Sasa appeared.

“Takatsuki! Looook!”

“Wow?!”

Sasa was wearing a skirt with a floral pattern on it that looked like hibiscuses. The issue was her upper half—she was only covered by a thin band of cloth.

“A-Aren’t you cold?” I asked. She was only covering her chest, so her stomach was on full display.

“Not really. Isn’t there something else you should be telling me?” she asked, posing cutely.

“Th-That looks cute on you...”

It put a bit much on show though, and I didn’t know where to look. This outfit was super different from her usual clothes.

She’s adorable...

“Oh my, that’s a dodgy look you’re wearing.” She grinned, coming over toward me and putting an arm around my neck.

“Makoto, look over here,” Lucy said at the same time, leaning against my other side and following suit.

Their hands met behind my neck and their gazes locked with one another.

“Hmm, that looks pretty pervy, Lu.”

“Don’t you think your clothes aren’t great for adventuring?”

“That’s fine. They’re for Takatsuki.”

“W-Well these are to show to Makoto too!”

Why are they clashing over every little thing? Flustered, I went and asked how much the outfits would be.

“You’ve got some cuties with you, mister. How about these accessories too? They’re talismans!”

I ended up buying a whole bunch of stuff alongside the clothes!

“Thanks, Makoto,” said Lucy. Sasa gave her own thanks at the same time.

The two of them were happy at least, so whatever.

We spent a little while longer going around the stalls. They were wearing the clothes they’d just bought, so I was leading around a pair of sexy-cute girls. I had a feeling that it was getting us a bit more attention than usual. The two of them argued a bit from time to time, and I honestly had no idea how to deal with it.

Once we were done with shopping, we just wandered around for a bit.

“Hey, look at that,” Lucy said, pointing to a sign.

“The Bonds of Fate Shrine,” it proclaimed in Japanese.

Whoever made this was definitely from our world. From Japan, even.

“Hey, Takatsuki, how about you and I go in?”

“Hey, Makoto, let’s go in, me and you!”

The two of them had spoken in unison and were now silently glaring at each other.

Come on, guys... Quit it?

“Hey, Lu?”

“Say, Aya?”

The two of them sounded like they were moments away from a catfight.

“Come on, quit fighting!” I frantically tried.

I paid for entry for the three of us and we went through. The entrance was made to look like a torii as well.

Is this...from our world?

As we entered, there was an employee there to explain things to us. “There is a shrine further inside. If you make it there and wish for something, it will be granted. However, there are various obstacles you will need to overcome, so do your best!”

“Well, then...”

It was like some attraction at a theme park. Also, this wasn’t our world, but there was a shrine? I thought the goddesses controlled this world.

No point in thinking about it too hard.

We followed a stone-paved path into the trees. It was well-maintained and easy to walk along, completely unlike the paths back in the Great Forest.

“Makoto.”

“Takatsukiii.”

Let me correct myself: considering that I was being pulled along by two girls from both sides, I’d never found it more difficult to walk.

We took it easy with our pace. Then suddenly, a monster(?) appeared before us with a forced roar. It was short and stout, with fur that looked more like knitted wool... Almost like a teddy bear, and not all that scary.

“Oh no! Makoto, it’s a monster!”

“Takatsuki! Let’s get it!”

Lucy readied her staff and Sasa’s eyes sharpened.

“Hold on! It’s not!” I yelled.

It was obviously a teddy monster! Just an employee wearing a tired costume and growling, “Rawr, rawr,” like something you’d see in a rural theme park. It was kinda cute, actually.

“Oh no! A monster appeared! You there, mister! Show off for the ladies and take it out. Here, your weapon,” said the employee, appearing from nowhere and handing me something.

A shinai? It was one of those wooden swords that people used in kendo. Seriously, were we back in Japan?

Either way, I took it and swung.

Squeak!

That was a cute noise.

“Um, was that the best you have?” came an apologetic voice from inside the outfit.

“Sorry, it was,” I answered. After all, I was weaker than the girls.

“Makoto! Get back! I’ll do it.” A fireball the size of a house was floating over Lucy’s head as she readied her staff.

“Takatsuki! It’s mine!” Sasa exclaimed, hoisting a boulder that was just as big over her own head.

“Ahhhh! I’m gonna die!” the costumed person screeched before running away. The person that had given me the shinai had also fled at the same time.

“Wha?” both Lucy and Sasa said in unison, tilting their heads.

I’m sorry the girls in our party are so strong.

So that’s the game here.

As we progressed, the shrine’s staff sent out more (fake) monsters, and they appeared on the path in front of us. Normally, the male customers would elegantly repel them and capture the hearts of their female companions.

In our case though, Lucy’s yell of “Meteo” ended up with huge boulders creating craters, and Sasa’s grunting punches felled some massive trees.

The costumed employees scattered… This was a mess.

We’re gonna get kicked out… I thought as we progressed deeper into the forest. Then, a huge slime double the height of a person appeared.

This one’s real.

I guess they couldn’t all be fake, but this was the first time I’d come across one of these monsters. Right, how were we supposed to get rid of this again?

“A massive slime?!” Sasa exclaimed, bringing her fists up.

“It’s okay, Makoto, Aya. This is a jelly slime, so they’re not dangerous at all,” Lucy explained.

“Right, I remember.” Jelly slimes were about as strong as horned rabbits, if I recalled correctly. They were also herbivores that usually spent their time eating seaweed on beaches. Why was it this far inland?

“Well, let’s take it out then,” Sasa said, cocking her fist.

Damn!

“Aya, no!” Lucy tried to yell, but it was already too late.

I remembered something I’d learned in the temple: jelly slimes were exceptionally weak, but it was best not to attack them physically. Because…

“Hyah!”

Splash went the jelly slime as it burst. The three of us yelled out as bits of it were flung all over us.

“Ugh, the hell? It’s so slimy!”

“Bleh… Takatsuki, it’s all slippery and in my clothes.”

Lucy and Sasa’s brand-new outfits were drenched in the gloop. They had already been tight-fitting, but now, the fabric clung even closer to each girl’s body.

Nope. This isn’t happening.

“Makoto?”

“Takatsuki?”

“W-We should hurry,” I got out, my voice sounding strangled.

I can’t look. Calm Mind, Calm Mind.

The girls started complaining.

“Makoto, are we carrying on dressed like this?”

“We should get changed.”

“I guess so.”

It’s a shame, but I suppose we should call it quits here. Just as I was thinking that, the employee turned up again.

“Oh my! You’re all covered in the jelly slime! That won’t do, not at all.”

Gah! Where’d she come from?!

“Right this way, I’ll guide you.” She dragged us along, leading us to a small cottage.

“Um, and this place is?” I asked.

“Two hours are included in the price. Longer stays are a supplementary charge,” recited the staff member.

That’s not an explanation! We were all covered in goop though, so there was no other option. Despite the lack of explanation, the three of us walked inside.

It was like a hotel room.

The issue, though…

“Hey, Takatsuki… You’re seeing this, right?”

“Yeah, I am…”

“What’s wrong, guys? This room’s adorable,” Lucy said, looking around without any apparent issues.

The interior design was based on shades of pink. It was dimly lit with indirect lighting. I guess there was some kind of perfume as well because I could smell something sweet.

On top of all of that, a king-sized four-poster bed dominated the center of the room.

Is this some kind of love hotel…? I was a virgin, so I’d never been to one, but I’d seen rooms like this on the internet!

The Bonds of Fate Shrine… Did they mean those kinds of bonds?

“Look, Aya, there’s a bath.”

“Hey! Don’t just strip off!” I yelled.

“Turn away, Makoto.”

“Tell me that first!” I complained, hurriedly doing as I was told. Though, considering my *RPG Player* skill, I could see behind me too.

“I’m going to join her. Are you coming, Takatsuki?”

“Sasa, don’t be stupid.”

“Kidding, kidding.” She laughed impishly.

I could hear her undressing.

D-Don’t look…I can see, but don’t look.

Sasa and Lucy went into the bathroom, both laughing. Before long, I could hear splashing.

"Wow, Lu! Your chest's huge!"

"Nah, it's norm— Hey, no touching!"

"It's so soft. No fair tempting Takatsuki with them!" Sasa complained, before adding, "Take that!"

"You've done it now! You're the one not playing fair since you've known him for so long! You take that!"

"Whoa, that was too hard... Ahhh! Why, you!"

"Mph! You're too good at this, Aya!"

"And you're way more perverted with it!"

That was the conversation I could hear.

What the hell...?

If I kept listening, I'd go crazy, so I moved further away.

What do I do, then? I was left alone in the room. It was fine for them to go bathe, but I was on my own and bored until they returned.

Hang on.

"Hey, elementals?" I called. "*Water Magic: Waterball*."

The elementals' magic generated water over my head, and I used it to wash away the jelly slime. Then I dumped the dirty water outside. While I was at it, I dried my clothes, and everything was all fine again. *Yeah, there's no need for me to go into the bath.*

I could hear cheers coming from the bathroom. They got along well enough when they were on their own, but I just wished they'd act like it while I was with them.

"Makoto's gonna be lonely out there."

"You're right. Takatsukiii, why don't you come in?"

"Come on, Makoto, it's fine!"

"I'm good here!" I yelled back. Damn it, they knew I wouldn't and now they're teasing me!

I lay back on the huge bed, which was large enough to sleep the three of us all at once.

All the stuff that happened in Labyrinthos was tough...

We got a lot out of it, though.

I got to meet Sasa again.

I fought against the blight dragons with elemental magic.

And...

I uncovered Noah's real goal—to overthrow this world.

Considering the Sacred Deities reigning over this land, it was a pretty big ask. *Is it even possible?* Everything seemed too difficult, and I had no real idea if it was or not. Still, our adventure this time was a success, I guess. We were getting better, step by step.

Still... I'm so tired...

We'd been in the dungeon so much, not to mention the uproar at the tavern on the last day. It'd been a while since I'd relaxed or taken it easy.

My eyes got heavier and heavier. I closed them and was soon dragged down into the depths of sleep.

Noah...wasn't in my dreams.

Did I fall asleep? I thought to myself as I came to. Damn it, there was an extra charge if we were here too long, right?

"Are you up, Takatsuki?"

I looked to the left to see Sasa giggling.

"Yeah, sorry, I passed out," I apologized to the two of them.

"It's fine. Aya said we shouldn't wake you up, seeing as you looked so tired."

Lucy was over to the right, resting her chin in her hands and smiling at me.

"My bad, Lucy. Thanks, though." I rubbed my sleepy eyes and sat up. Something was wrong.

"I don't often see you sleep so soundly," Lucy commented, fiddling with her hair as she giggled as well.

"Do you always sleep with Takatsuki?"

"Aya, I mean *sleep*, not...like that. He rests lightly while we're adventuring, so it's just rare for him to sleep deeply."

"Hmmm."

"What?"

"I want to sleep with him too."

"Isn't that what we're doing now?"

"Ah, right."

What was with them? They were giggling and laughing together and were getting on way better now. What'd happened?

"Lucy, Sasa. Um?"

"Morning, Takatsuki."

"You seem sleepy still."

The two of them turned to look at me. That was fine, but...

"Why aren't you wearing clothes?"

Both of them were only covered with a sheet. Their shoulders were bare, and I could see the upper portion of their chests, so I knew they weren't wearing any tops at least.

“Well, we just got out of the bath, Takatsuki.”

“Our clothes are still drying.”

“R-Right...”

Yeah, their clothes had gotten all mucky because of the jelly slime.

But hang on, this is bad! I was sharing a bed with two naked girls in a love hotel or at least something similar!

“I’ll dry them off with magic, then we can get out of here,” I said, keeping my eyes away from them and trying to get out of bed.

“What are you saying?”

“You’re not going to try anything, even in this situation?”

Sasa and Lucy asked questions simultaneously, both of them grabbing my arms.

“Uh... Wha?”

Hold on! What the hell were *they* saying?! *This is weird...*

I wasn’t dense. I knew the two of them had at least some affection for me.

Reallllllly? said a voice in my head.

Noah! Don’t make this worse!

All of this was far too sudden.

“Hey, Takatsuki.” Sasa breathed, tracing a cold hand down my cheek.

“Makoto...” Lucy murmured, her own warm fingers slipping along my collar bone.

An unspeakably pleasant shiver ran down my spine. *Why are they being so aggressive?!*

It was completely different than before. Plus, I’d have said the two of them were arguing earlier, but now they were double-teaming me!

Makoto, hey, look at the sign on the wall, I heard from Noah.

The sign? There was something by the room’s entrance that looked like the owners had written it. Instructions? One of the lines read, “This room has a scent for a more sensual mood.”

So that’s why?! I *did* remember smelling something sweet when we came in. I took a closer look at the girls’ faces and saw that both of their cheeks were reddened, and their eyes were heavily lidded. The “scent” from the room must have worked on them.

“Whoa, stop!”

The two of them had started undressing. The dim lighting of the room let me just see their bodies as they removed the sheets covering them.

“Come on, Makoto, strip off.”

“I’ll help you.”

Wait, were they stronger now?! No, I was just too weak...

In a moment, they had gotten my shirt off.

“Wow, you’ve got muscles now.”

“You’ve seen Makoto naked before?” Lucy demanded after a pause.

“Tee hee hee, we had swim class together in junior high, after all.”

“I guess I’ve trained since then…”

Back then, I’d done nothing club-related, but had just gone home and gamed all the time. Because of that, I’d been pretty lanky. That hadn’t changed much, but I guess I *was* healthier now.

But now’s not the time for that!

Th-That tickles! Sasa had gotten on top of me.

“H-Hey, Sasa?” I was panicking, but Lucy joined in too.

“You saw me bathing before. Now it’s my turn,” she said, moving to lick at my neck.

“Hyaah,” I cried out weakly.

“That was a strange noise, Takatsuki.”

“You’re so cute, Makoto.”

The two of them had bewitching smiles as they got ever closer.

Th-This is bad. I froze as words floated up in the air.

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Will you have s*x with them?
Yes
No
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The hell’s the big idea?!

So if I go along with this…?

No! They’re important to me. I didn’t want things to take that turn while they were under the dodgy effect of some aphrodisiac!

How sad, Makoto, you’re not taking the feast offered to you?

Shaddap! This was my choice. *I’d* make it!

“Wait a minute!” I yelled, getting out of the bed and tossing the source of the scent out the window.

Water Magic: Fog!

I used the mist from my magic as a ventilation system to get rid of the remaining odor.

The sweet scent vanished, and as it did, the lidded look left the girls’ eyes.

“Wha?”

“U-Uh?”

The pair exchanged glances.

They were on a bed.

They were naked.

They screamed out in unison.

“Um, Sasa? Lucy?”

The two of them had come back to their senses, and I’d dried their clothes. I’d just waited outside until they’d changed. And now, they were sitting in a corner of the room, cradling their heads and mumbling.

“Urgh… Why did I…?” Sasa murmured.

“Argh…” Lucy groaned. “I tried to act like Mama…”

At least the two of them were back to normal.

"It was because of the shady fragrance the room had," I told them. By the way, they were wearing their original clothes again.

"Ugh, Takatsuki, did you see?"

"He saw me...again... That's the second time now..."

"It's fine," I stressed. "I didn't. See. Anything."

"Liar!" they called in unison.

Well, true.

I calmed them down as we headed back to Fujiyan and Nina's lodging.

"Oh, my esteemed Tackie! Back so late?"

"Oh my, you must have enjoyed last night'h."

The other two were a bit *overly* sensitive to that remark.

Where'd Nina hear that, anyway?

We were back on the ship, headed home.

Fujiyan and Nina had teased us about our late return, but Lucy and Sasa had gotten in a better mood once they'd eaten.

Every time one of them met my gaze, they'd flush bright red and look away. They'd probably be back to normal soon, though.

I leaned on the handrail and looked out over the ground below.

It's so peaceful.

"Takatsuki..." Sasa said, coming into earshot and leaning next to me. Her cheeks were a little red, so I figured she was still embarrassed.

"The wind feels nice, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah... You looking at the scenery?"

Huh, that's a coincidence. I think I said something about wishing Sasa and I could look at this view together, back when I was first traveling to Labyrinthos. Didn't I?

Seems like my dream had been granted.

"What's up, Takatsuki? You're grinning."

"I am? Well...I was just happy to be with you."

"Wha?! I-I see!"

Uh, did I admit something strange?

There was silence between us for a while. Should I try and say something clever? Although I guess with Sasa, it'd just make things weirder.

The green scenery stretched on endlessly.

"Makoto, Fujiyan's making tea. Aya, we've got cakes."

"Really? Yay!" Sasa pattered off. It was cute, and I noticed Lucy staring at me as I watched Sasa leave.

"You look like you're having fun."

"I do?"

"Are you happy being with Aya?"

"Yeah. She's one of the few friends I have from back in my old world, and I can only go home with her thanks to you, Lucy."

There was a big crosswind as I spoke, and the ship shook and listed.

“Ahh!” Lucy cried out, falling toward me.

“Whoa there,” I said, grabbing her by the shoulder. I could feel the warmth through my hand. She was wearing the bracelet from the Grandsage, but her body temperature didn’t seem to have changed at all.

“Th-Thank you…Makoto.”

Her face was right in front of mine. The ship was level again, but she was still leaning against me and making no move to separate us. I didn’t want to force it, so we just remained silent.

So, uh, how long were we staying like this? I had no idea when we should move apart.

“Hey! I take my eyes off you for one minute and you’re getting ahead!” Sasa called as she returned.

“H-How is this getting ahead?!”

“C’mon, Lu! Let’s go!” Sasa said, dragging her away.

Despite the arguing, they were fairly cheery with each other, linking hands and heading inside.

I guess it’d gone okay…?

Suddenly, I could see a huge blue expanse on the horizon.

That was Lake Chimay, in the middle of Roses. Macallan, our home, was near that lake as well.

I’d finished my first real expedition since I’d come to this world, had been reunited with a classmate, and had safely returned home.

All thanks to my goddess’s guidance.

I suppose the adventure was a success. That’s just like Noah.

I looked down from the ship again, and the world seemed to continue on forever. As far as I could see, there were mountain ranges and swathes of green. Everywhere that I couldn’t see was somewhere I’d never been.

They’re the Sacred Deities and Noah’s enemies...

Being her believer, I was the world’s enemy.

“I’ve got a long way to go…”

My goal was so far away it was giving me vertigo.

“But still, that makes it all worth it,” I muttered to myself, leaving the deck to head inside.

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you all, whether you read from volume one or from *Shosetsuka ni Naro*. To those only reading this second volume for the first time, it's good to meet you. I've managed to publish this second volume of *Zero Believers*.

I've got some more background info for you. When I name Japanese characters, I try to give them easy names. Aya Sasaki from this volume is nicknamed Sasa. She was actually based on a real friend I had called Suzuki, which I shortened to Suu. I just adjusted things. By the way, I actually know at least four Suus, so it's pretty much an everyday word for me now. Stray thought—several of our protagonist's classmates showed up again in this volume. The only one that had a role in the last volume was Fujiyan, so I ended up not making use of the full class I sent to the new world. The different members of the class will have more time to shine as the story goes on, and I'd like to do some kind of reunion with them. Creating each character is tough though… I'll do my best. Finally, I want to thank Tam-U, who has continued to provide such wonderful illustrations, and my editor, Y, for all the advice. Finally, to my readers, I hope you enjoy *Zero Believers* in the future as well.

Noah
Full Clearing Another World under a GODDESS with Zero Believers
2
The Girl Reincarnated as a Calamity
Story Isle Osaki
Art Tam-U
"OH, YOU'RE HERE?"

"COME THIS WAY. TALKING LIKE THIS IS DIFFICULT."
The Grandsage
Lucy
Aya
"EXCUUUSE US..."
Makoto

"UGH, THE HELL? IT'S SO SLIMY!"
"BLEH... TAKATSUKI, IT'S ALL SLIPPERY AND IN MY CLOTHES."

Bonus Short Stories

Drinking at Mary's

"In you go!" Mary urged.

Lucy and I did as she asked.

S-So this is a woman's room...? I've never been in one before. It smells kinda good.

"H-Hmmm...it's a nice place," Lucy said.

She was right. The antique furniture along with the classy curtains and carpets all came together brilliantly to create a very feminine room.

"What's through here?" I asked, moving toward a door.

"N-Nooo!" Mary called, stopping me.

"Makoto..." Lucy said despairingly, "you can't just go snooping around a girl's place."

Oh, I guess not.

"Come on, drink up, both of you! I'll get some snacks together." Mary pushed a bottle of wine and some glasses toward us before going to the kitchen. It looked like she was getting some cheese and ham together.

I've already had a fair bit, though...

We'd been at a bar, and the cocktails there had been pretty strong. Instead of taking some wine, I used magic to pour water into my glass.

"Makotooo, why're you going for water?" Lucy wheedled, leaning against me. *Is she already drunk?*

While that was happening, Mary came back with the snacks. We chatted for a while, picking at the food. It didn't feel much different from when we drank around the guild. Although, the sense of security from being in a home did make things go quicker.

"Argh, I'm so hot," Lucy complained, removing her outer clothing, which was already fairly revealing. The motion twisted her underwear slightly to the side.

"Lucy..." Mary asked, "was that on purpose, or do you just not realize?"

"Was *what* on purpose?"

Mary, she never realizes, I answered in my mind. Why is she so defenseless...?

"I'm hot too," Mary added.

"Wha?!" She's undressing too?!

There was now a scantily clad woman on either side of me.

This is bad... It's gotta be. The situation was no good, and I needed to knock myself out.

I took a glass of strong booze and downed the whole thing. It burned in my throat as it went back, but I swallowed past it.

"Whoa..."

My eyes started swimming instantly and I felt myself drifting off.

◇

“An unfamiliar ceiling…”

My head was pounding. *Where am I?*

I looked around and saw Mary rolling and muttering in her sleep, along with Lucy snoring cutely.

Suddenly, I was *wide* awake.

Right, I got drunk at Mary’s… Okay, up I get.

I could wash up in the river. Leaving her house, I headed for the water, though I had to walk through town to get there.

“H-Hey! Makoto just came out of Mary’s house!” I heard someone say.

“What?!” answered another guy.

Ah, damn it. Some adventurers I knew had spotted me. I needed to think up some excuse.

“Makotooo, why’re you leaving without me,” Lucy called, rubbing her eyes as she wandered out of Mary’s house. The problem, though…was her outfit...

“L-Look at how she’s dressed…” said one of the adventurers.

“She definitely had a night of fun…”

“So the three of them…”

What were they all talking about?!

After that, a strange rumor started to make its way around the guild, and explaining it away took quite a bit of effort.

Sasa’s Otherworld Cooking

I—Aya Sasaki—woke up. Bizarrely, I wasn’t in a cold cave, but in a warm bed.

Right, this is an inn in the adventurer’s town…

“Morning, Sasa,” I heard out of nowhere.

“Gah! M-Morning, T-Takatsuki,” I managed to stutter out. I realized he was standing nearby, wearing a smile.

O-Oh yeah, I was able to see Takatsuki again yesterday, and he brought me to a human town.

“Nina’s getting breakfast ready, so you just need to wait a bit.” That was all he said before leaving.

No! He saw me waking up?!

I hadn’t needed to worry about that kind of thing in Labyrinthos, but now, I needed to get used to living around humans again, and fast.

◇

I asked Takatsuki and Lucy about their plans. Takatsuki said he’d be venturing into the dungeon every day to increase the strength of what he called his “elemental magic.”

All so he could help me with my revenge…

On top of that, the monsters in the dungeon had been agitated recently, making it extremely dangerous. Even so, he was going.

“Because it’s for you,” he’d told me.

You can't just say that kind of thing! He's gotten way better at dealing with women since coming here. And he's helping me with something so dangerous, right after we reconnected... I feel so bad. Is there anything I can do?

"My esteemed Tackie, what will you take for provisions? If need be, I can ask Lady Nina to deliver some," Fujiwara added.

"It's fine, I'll just bring a potion or two."

"Are potions...not, essentially, zero calories?"

"Well, they fill you up at least," Takatsuki answered.

So he wasn't bothered about what he ate in this world either... Well, I guess he'd eaten pretty much nothing but McD*nald's during junior high.

I've got it! I'll make him lunch! I decided.

◇

"Hmm, the spices are all different..."

I'd decided to cook with ingredients from this world. The meat, fish, and even vegetables might not be foods I'd seen before, but I could predict how they'd taste. The recipes all called for baking, boiling, or frying. No, the problem was the seasoning. There was salt, which was universal, but...

The sugar...or rather, the sweet stuff, is odd. The actual spices are all nothing like we'd used in Japan.

I'd never seen any of these seasonings before, and I wasn't entirely sure *how* to use them as I cooked. The flavors didn't end up tasting anything like I'd expected, so I was fretting about how difficult it was.

"What seems to be the problem, Lady Sasaki?" Fujiwara asked.

"Oh, Fujiwara. Well, you see..."

"Oho, lunch for our esteemed Tackie to take adventuring! The seasoning must be a concern for you! Just leave that with me!" he said, before vanishing off somewhere.

◇

"Whaaa?!"

Lined up in front of me were containers of sugar, soy sauce, miso, mirin, Worcestershire sauce, ketchup, and even mayonnaise.

"F-Fujiwara, how did you..."

He chuckled.

"The Fujiwara Trading Company sells them. After all, reproducing Japanese flavors is necessary when you find yourself in another world!"

"R-Right..."

"Now! Use them as you wish! He shall be most pleased."

"Y-Yeah. I'll do my best. Thanks, Fujiwara."

I made sweet fried eggs, hamburg steak, potato salad, and onigiri.

I-It doesn't feel like it's from this world at all... There's no difference now. Otherworld cooking is difficult.

"Sasa! That lunch was delicious!"

Well, that doesn't matter... Takatsuki was happy with it.

Class 1-A's Mini-Reunion

The party thrown to celebrate the blight dragons' defeat was over, and the area had been cleared away. That said, there were still plenty of people drinking. I assumed they'd continue until the morning. With quite a few folks making a racket, it felt like pretty much the same atmosphere as the guild back in Macallan.

Just as I was thinking we should go, I heard a yell from Sakurai.

"Takatsuki!"

"Hm?"

"You're leaving already?" he asked. "Fancy stopping off before the night's over?"

An after-party? "Hmmm…well today was pretty tiring, so I kinda want to sleep."

"I see…" Sakurai answered, slumping. The look on his face made me feel pretty awkward...

"Come now, my esteemed Tackie, it is an opportunity for us classmates to gather once more." Even Fujiyan was for it.

"Oh, hey, Saki!"

"Aya!"

Sasa and Yokoyama are coming too...

"I'm going to go to bed now," Lucy declared before leaving.

Well, if everyone else's going, I guess I can join them...

◇

"Cheers!" we all chorused.

There were five of us here: Sakurai, Yokoyama, Sasa, Fujiyan, and me. Nina had offered to keep watch and was waiting outside.

Suddenly, I realized something: *Everyone here is from Japan.*

Nina and Lucy probably had begged off to arrange it like that.

Soon, I heard the girls start gossiping.

"Hey, Aya? How far have you and Takatsuki gone?" Yokoyama asked.

"Wha?! W-Well… What about you and Sakurai?" Sasa answered.

"Us? We're already engaged."

"You are?! Congratulations!"

Oh? Sakurai's engaged?

"Takatsuki, Fujiwara, the two of you usually stay in Roses, right?" asked the guy in question.

Fujiyan answered for us both. "We do indeed, in a town called Macallan."

"What do you usually do there?"

"Hmm," I murmured, thinking. "Hunt goblins, I guess?"

"G-Goblins?"

"Yeah, they're nasty monsters that attack travelers. But they're also weak enough that I can take them out, no problem."

"Wow…" Sakurai nodded several times in admiration. Still, his reaction…

“You’ve never seen one before?” I asked.

“I-I have!” he stammered. “From a distance though…barely.”

So he’d never fought one.

“Takatsuki,” Yokoyama interjected, “Ryousuke’s the hero, so he shouldn’t need to fight the small-fry monsters. That’s what his subordinate knights and I are for.”

I nodded in understanding, but Sakurai didn’t look particularly happy. He probably didn’t appreciate that things were made easier for him by his “subordinates.” *As good a person as ever.*

“Sakurai, you’re like the ultimate weapon, so they’ve got to keep you safe,” I commented.

“Making the knights and Saki fight, just so I stay safe… It feels pathetic.”

“You’re nothing like that,” I countered. “You were the only one that could beat those blight dragons, and *that’s* what heroes are for.” Even now, the memory of his single attack splitting those drakes apart was overwhelming. *Man, heroes are cool…*

“Takatsuki, you were awesome when you took down the harpy queen,” Sasa said, patting me on the shoulder. *Had I looked jealous?*

“Regardless, it is wonderful for us 1-A students to be gathered in one place!” Fujiyan exclaimed brightly.

He was right. I’d been left behind at the water temple, and Sasa had been reincarnated into a monster. Sakurai had gained his hero skill, but that had set him against foes like the blight dragons.

We’d all done well to make it here.

And so, we spent much of the night making merry with our classmates.

A Discussion between a Wicked Deity and Her Believer

It was the night after we’d all finished shopping at the bazaar.

“Say, Makoto? Why didn’t you make a move when those two were all over you like that?” Noah asked me seriously.

All over me…? Does she mean Lucy and Sasa?

“Would it have been better?” I asked in return. I turned to look in her direction but kept practicing my water magic.

“Well, I know you want to lose your virginity whenever you can, right?”

“Hey, quit reading my mind or I’ll quit being your believer.”

“H-Hang on!” she protested, waving her hands around. “I’m a non-mind-reading goddess!”

What’s that supposed to mean? A “non-mind-reading goddess” indeed.

“They only acted like that because of that weird scent,” I told her, my expression composed. “I don’t want to lose it like that—it’s not fair to them.”

“But you were so tense, right?” she returned with a grin.

“Guh…”

I was! I thought it was fortune! Agh, I can’t deal with it!

“You’re so calm when fighting monsters, but you go to pieces around pretty girls.”

“Shut it! Besides, I can’t cope with that forcefulness! I want things to be more romantic when I’m with a girl!” I insisted, as pathetic as it sounded.

Noah seemed even more pleased, though.

“I’ll teach my cowardly Makoto a surefire way to get any girl!”

“W-What?”

“Okay! Come over here!” She beckoned to me.

It wasn’t like I had much choice, so I walked over to her, stopping close enough that her skirt was just on the verge of brushing against me.

“So now!” she declared, snapping her fingers.

What? I thought, as suddenly, a big wall appeared behind me.

“Here I go.”

“Wait, hold on, what ar—”

Before I could finish my question, her hand shot past the side of my face, smacking the wall with a thud.

“Don’t get so close,” she whispered, in a manly voice for some reason.

Yup, she’s cute.

“I call it the kabedon!” she said smugly, puffing up her chest.

T-That was...

“Noah?”

“Whaaat?” she asked with a giggle. “Do you have a better opinion of your goddess?”

I should tell her. “The ‘kabedon’ was already popular before I came here, you know?” If anything, that technique was starting to die out.

There was silence.

I can’t believe this useless goddess, shamelessly ripping off our moves and then naming them… As if I wouldn’t know better.

“D-Don’t call me that!”

Considering how bad her planning seemed to be, could we really overturn the world like this...? Guess I’d have to pull my weight as her believer.

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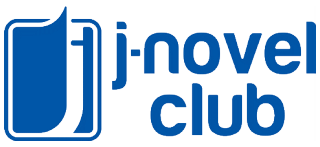

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